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SCIENCE FICTION

September
1968
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by
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by
Robert Silverberg

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by
James E. Gunn

And concluding . . .
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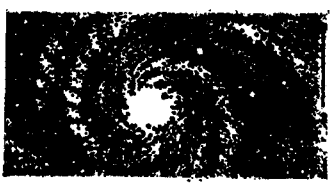

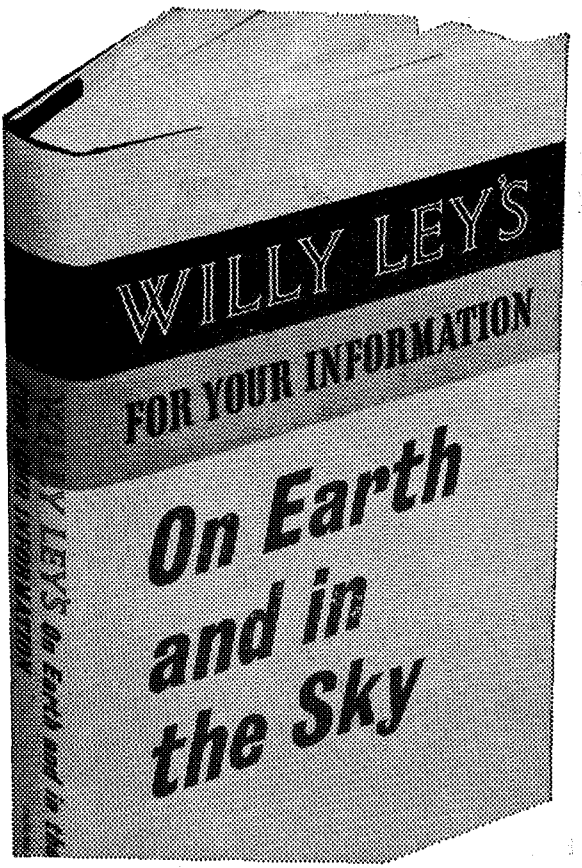

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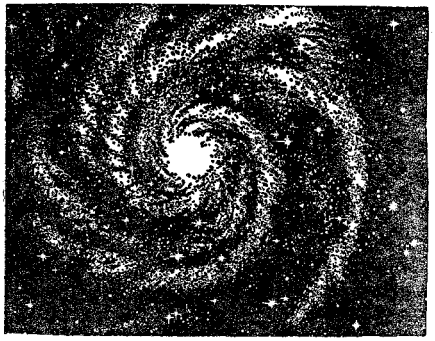

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FILM FESTIVAL (II)

Not long ago we raised the question of why the United States couldn't support, or hadn't decided to try to support, an annual Science Fiction Film Festival, more or less along the lines of the Trieste affair which runs through the first weeks of July every year.

Turns out a lot of other people had been thinking along similar lines, and this is in the nature of a progress report.

New York: This winter the Museum of Modern Art is planning a special science-fiction film program. Details are not yet set; but the Museum's resources in procuring film prints are extensive, and with a little luck it will be—well, maybe not a festival, in the sense that it will be celebrating the best of the newest but certainly a useful retrospective, bringing back the best of the old.

Houston, Texas: From September 29th to October 13th the Houston store, Sakowitz, in conjunction with various local civic, cultural and business organizations, will be running a Festival of the Future. It isn't quite clear, at this writing, just what form it will take; but there appears to be a possibility that films will be involved, and space-age exhibits, demonstrations and so on, some of them in connection with Houston's Manned Space Center, are definite.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin: The city campus of the University of Wisconsin this year ran a Secondary Universe Conference, with lectures by William Tenn, Judith Merril, Samuel R. Delany and others; and there seems to be hope that it will over the course of the next two or three years turn into much the sort of festival we had in mind.

Well fine! We still think it's a good idea. Presenting science fiction in cinematic form offers some hard problems to solve, and by no means all of the producers have managed to solve them; but there's a solid body of interesting items available, from *Me-*

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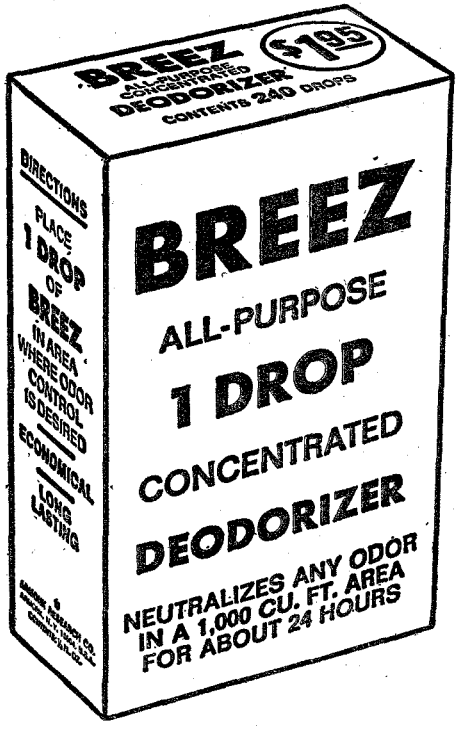

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tropolis and *The Crazy Ray* to *Planet of the Apes* and 2001. We think an American film festival, with suitable outriders in the form of panels, exhibits, lectures and workshops, would be interesting in its own right.

And we even think it might help solve some of those problems. . . .

Speaking of 2001, we've had a rather heavy influx of letters on Lester dey Rey's review of it, mostly disagreeing with his views, and mostly rather outspoken about it.

What del Rey liked about the film was its tremendously successful technical effects, plus some very effective incidents and scenes. What he disliked was what struck him as a lack of cohesion, plus a ending that was allusive and symbolic where he thought it should have been explicit and lucid.

It strikes us that this is the difference between clear-quill "science fiction" and that other related thing which is sometimes called "The New Wave" or "The New Thing" or "Speculative Fiction." To our way of thinking, science fiction is as inventive a form of literature as any, but unlike most the inventiveness takes place primarily in the subject matter instead of in the treatment. And if the theme is mind-stretching enough, symbols and allusions are only tolerable when the author cannot manage to say what he wants to say in any other form; in that view, the choice of evocative treatment over explicit and literal statement is not a triumph but a surrender.

We wish 2001 had not surrendered. It had something to say. It really should have said it.

Next month we hope to have winners in our "Vietnam Contest," plus a progress report on what happens next. Several hundred entries are already in, rather more than we expected, everything considered. Judging them is going to be a bit of a job . . . but we'll hope to get it done by the deadline.

Then, of course, comes the interesting part. If you missed the June and July issues, try not to miss the next few. What we're up to is to try to exploit the lively intelligence of science-fiction readers and writers to generate possible solutions not only to the Vietnam conflict but to other similar dilemmas . . . and convert them, by means of some interesting new problem-solving techniques, into actual programs that can in fact be carried out.

A large order? You bet But it ought to be fun trying. . . .

—THE EDITOR

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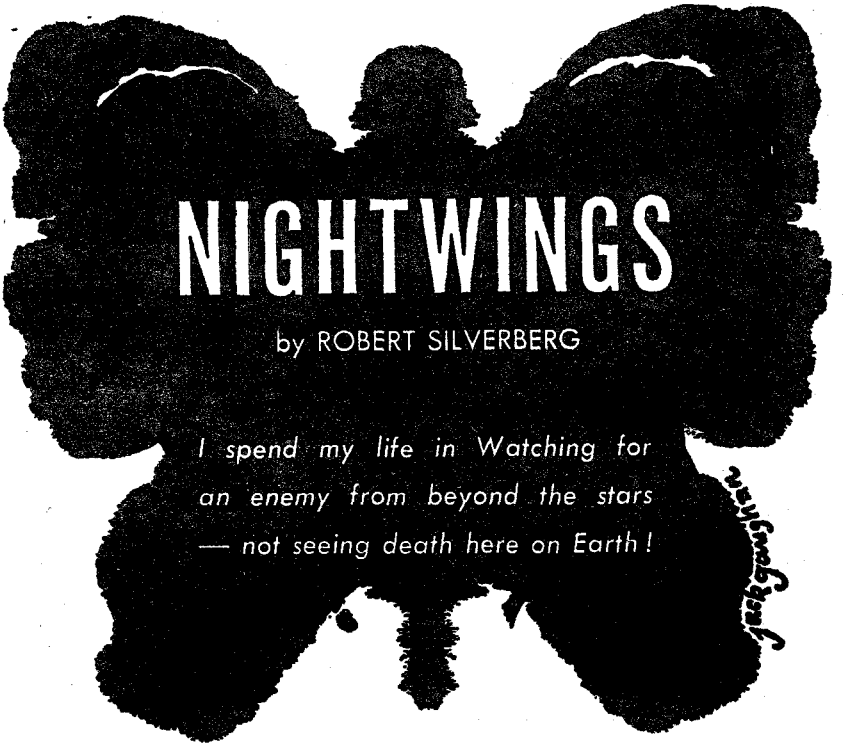
NIGHTWINGS
by ROBERT SILVERBERG
I spend my life in Watching for an enemy from beyond the stars — not seeing death here on Earth!

I

Roum is a city built on seven hills. They say it was a capital of man in one of the earlier cycles. I do not know of that, for my guild is Watching, not Remembering; but as I had my first glimpse of Roum, coming upon it from the south at twilight, I could see that in former days it must have been of great significance. Even now it was a mighty city of many thousands of souls.

Its bony towers stood out sharply against the dusk. Lights glimmered appealingly. On my left hand the sky was ablaze with splendor as the sun relinquished possession. Streaming bands of azure and violet and crimson folded and writhed about one another in the nightly dance that brings the darkness. To my right

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blackness had already come. I attempted to find the seven hills, and failed, and still I knew that this was that Roum of majesty toward which all roads are bent, and I felt awe and deep respect for the works of our bygone fathers.

We rested by the long straight road, looking up at Roum. I said, "It is a goodly city. We will find employment there."

Beside me, Avluela fluttered her lacy wings. "And food?" she asked in her high, fluty voice. "And shelter? And wine?"

"Those too," I said. "All of those."

"How long have we been walking, Watcher?" she asked.

"Two days. Three nights."

"If I had been flying it would have been more swift."

"For you," I said. "You would have left us far behind and never seen us again. Is that your desire?"

She came close to me and rubbed the rough fabric of my sleeve, and then she pressed herself at me the way a flirting cat might do. Her wings unfolded into two broad sheets of gossamer through which I could still see the sunset and the evening lights, blurred, distorted, magical. I sensed the fragrance of her midnight hair. I put my arms to her and embraced her slender, boyish body.

She said, "You know it is my desire to remain with you always, Watcher. Always!"

"Yes, Avluela."

"Will we be happy in Roum?"

"We will be happy," I said, and released her.

"Shall we go into Roum now?"

"I think we should wait for Gormon," I said, shaking my head. "He'll be back soon from his explorations." I did not want to tell her of my weariness. She was only a child, seventeen summers old; what did she know of weariness or of age? And I am old. Not as old as Roum, but old enough.

"While we wait," she said, "may I fly?"

"Fly, yes."

I squatted beside our cart and warmed my hands at the throbbing generator while Avluela prepared to fly. First she removed her garments, for her wings have little strength and she cannot lift such extra baggage. Lithely, deftly, she peeled the glassy bubbles from her tiny feet, she wriggled free of her crimson jacket and of her soft, furry leggings. The vanishing light in the west sparkled over her slim form. Like all Fliers, she carried no surplus body tissue: her breasts were mere bumps, her buttocks flat, her thighs so spindly that there was a span of inches between them when she stood. Could she

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have weighed more than a quintal? I doubt it. Looking at her, I felt as always gross and earthbound, a thing of loathesome flesh, and yet I am not a heavy man.

By the roadside she genuflected, knuckles to the ground, head bowed to knees, as she said whatever ritual it is that the Fliers say. Her back was to me. Her delicate wings fluttered, filled with life, rose about her like a cloak whipped up by the breeze. I could not comprehend how such wings could possibly lift even so slight a form as Avluela's. They were not hawk-wings but butterfly-wings, veined and transparent, marked here and there with blotches of pigment, ebony and turquoise and scarlet. A sturdy ligament joined them to the two flat pads of muscle beneath her sharp shoulderblades; but what she did not have was the massive breastbone of a flying creature, the bands of corded muscle needed for flight. Oh, I know that the Fliers use more than muscle to get aloft, that there are mystical disciplines in their mystery. Even so, I who am of the Watchers remain skeptical of the more fantastic guilds.

Avluela finished her words. She rose; she caught the breeze with her wings; she ascended several feet. There she remained, suspended between earth and sky, while her wings beat frantically. It was not yet night, and Avluela's wings were merely night-wings. By day she could not fly, for the terrible pressure of the solar wind would hurl her to the ground. Now, midway between dusk and dark, it was still not the best time for her to go up. I saw her thrust toward the east by the remnant of light in the sky. Her arms as well as her wings thrashed; her small pointed face was grim with concentration; on her thin lips were the words of her guild. She doubled her body and shot it out, head going one way, rump the other, and abruptly she hovered horizontally, looking groundward, her wings thrashing against the air. Up, Avluela! Up!

Up it was, as by will alone she conquered the vestige of light that still glowed.

With pleasure I surveyed her naked form against the darkness. I could see her clearly, for a Watcher's eyes are keen. She was five times her own height in the air, now, and her wings spread to their full expanse, so that the towers of Roum were in partial eclipse for me. She waved. I threw her a kiss and offered words of love. Watchers do not marry, nor do they engender children, but Avluela was as a daughter to me, and I took pride in her flight. We had traveled together

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a year, now, since we had come together in Agupt, and it was as though I had known her all my long life. From her I drew a renewal of strength. I do not know what it was she drew from me. Security? Knowledge? A continuity with the days before her birth? I hoped only that she loved me as I loved her.

Now she was far aloft. She wheeled, soared, dived, pirouetted, danced. Her long black hair streamed from her scalp. Her body seemed only an incidental appendage to those two great wings, which glistened and throbbed and gleamed in the night. Up she rose, glorying in her freedom from gravity, making me feel all the more leadenfooted, and like some slender rocket she shot abruptly away in the direction of Roum. I saw the soles of her feet, the tips of her wings; then I saw her no more.

I sighed. I thrust my hands into the pits of my arms to keep them warm. How is it that I felt a winter chill and the girl Avluela could soar joyously bare through the sky?

It was now the twelfth of the twenty hours, and time once again for me to do the Watching. I went to the cart, opened my cases, prepared the instruments. Some of the dial-covers were yellowed and faded; the indicator needles had lost their luminous coating; sea-stains defaced the instrument housings, a relic of the time that pirates had assailed me in Earth Ocean. The worn and cracked levers and nodes responded easily to my touch as I entered the preliminaries. First one prays for a pure and perceptive mind; then one creates the affinity with one's instruments; then one does the actual Watching, searching the starry heavens for the enemies of man. Such is my skill and my craft. I grasped handles and knobs, thrust things from my mind, prepared myself to become an extension of my cabinet of devices.

I was only just past my threshold and into the first phase of Watchfulness when a deep and resonant voice said behind me, "Well, Watcher, how goes it?"

II

I sagged against the cart. There is a physical pain in being wrenched so unexpectedly from one's work. For a moment I felt claws clutching at my heart. My face grew hot; my eyes would not focus; the saliva drained from my throat. As soon as I could, I took the proper protective measures to ease the metabolic drain and severed myself from my instruments. Hiding my trembling as much as possible, I turned around.

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Gormon, the other member of our little band, had appeared and stood jauntily beside me, grinning, amused at my distress. I could not feel angry with him. One does not show anger at a guildless person no matter what the provocation.

Tightly, with effort, I said, "Did you spend your time rewardingly?"

"Very. Where's Avluela?"

I pointed heavenward. Gormon nodded.

"What have you found?" I asked.

"That this city is definitely Roum."

"There never was doubt of that."

"For me there was. But now I have proof."

"Yes?"

"In the overpocket. Look!"

From his tunic he drew his overpocket, set it on the pavement beside me, and expanded it so that he could insert his hand in its mouth. Grunting a little, he began to pull something heavy from the pouch, something heavy, of white stone, a long marble column, I now saw, fluted, pocked with age.

"From a temple of Imperial Roum!" Gormon exulted.

"You shouldn't have taken that."

"Wait!" he cried, and reached into the overpocket once more. He took from it a handful of circular metal plaques and scattered them jingling at my feet. "Coins! Money! Look at them, Watcher! The faces of the Caesars!"

"Of whom?"

"The ancient rulers. Don't you know your history of past cycles?"

I peered at him curiously. "You claim to have no guild, Gormon. Could it be you are a Remembrer and are concealing it from me?"

"Look at my face, Watcher. Could I belong to any guild? Would a Changeling be taken?"

"True enough," I said, eyeing the golden hue of him, the thick waxen skin, the red-pupiled eyes, the jagged mouth. Gormon had been weaned on teratogenetic drugs. He was a monster — handsome in his way, but a monster nevertheless, a Changeling, outside the laws and customs of man as they are practiced in the Third Cycle of civilization. And there is no guild of Changelings.

"There's more," Gormon said. The overpocket was infinitely capacious; the contents of a world, if need be, could be stuffed in its shriveled gray maw, and still it would be no larger than a man's hand. Gormon took from it bits of machinery, reading spools, an angular thing of brown metal that might have been an ancient tool,

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three squares of shining glass, five slips of paper — paper! — and a host of other relics of antiquity. "See?" he said. "A fruitful stroll, Watcher! And not just random booty. Everything recorded, everything labeled, stratum, estimated age, position when *in situ*. Here we have ten thousand years of Roum."

"Should you have taken these things?" I asked doubtfully.

"Why not? Who is to miss them? Who of this cycle cares for the past?"

"The Rememberers."

"They don't need solid objects to help them do their work."

"Why do you want these things, though?"

The past interests me, Watcher. In my guildless way I have my scholarly pursuits. Is that wrong? May not even a monstrosity seek knowledge?"

"Certainly, certainly. Seek what you wish. Fulfill yourself in your own way. This is Roum. At dawn we enter. I hope to find employment here."

"You may have difficulties."

"How so?"

"There are many Watchers already in Roum, no doubt. There will be little need for your services."

"I'll seek the favor of the Prince of Roum," I said.

"The Prince of Roum is a hard and cold and cruel man."

"You know of him?"

Gormon shrugged. "Somewhat." He began to stuff his artifacts back in the overpocket. "Take your chances with him, Watcher. What other choice do you have?"

"None," I said, and Gormon laughed, and I did not.

He busied himself with his ransacked loot of the past. I found myself deeply depressed by his words. He seemed so sure of himself in an uncertain world, this guildless one, this mutated monster, this man of inhuman look. How could he be so cool, so casual? He lived without concern for calamity and mocked those who admitted to fear. Gormon had been traveling with us for nine days, now, since we had met him in the ancient city beneath the volcano, to the south by the edge of the sea. I had not suggested that he join us. He had invited himself along, and at Avluela's bidding I accepted. The roads are dark and cold at this time of year, and dangerous beasts of many species abound, and an old man journeying with a girl might well consider taking with him a brawny one like Gormon. Yet there were times I wished he had not come with us, and this was one.

Slowly I walked back to my equipment.

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Gormon said, as though first realizing it, "Did I interrupt you at your Watching?"

I said mildly, "You did."

"Sorry. Go and start again. I'll leave you in peace." And he gave me his dazzling lopsided smile, so full of charm that it took the curse off the easy arrogance of his words.

I touched the knobs, made contact with the nodes, monitored the dials. But I did not enter Watchfulness, for I remained aware of Gormon's presence and fearful that he would break into my concentration once again at a painful moment, despite his promise. At length I looked away from the apparatus. Gormon stood at the far side of the road, craning his neck for some sight of Avluela. The moment I turned to him he became aware of me.

"Something wrong, Watcher?"

"No. The moment's not propitious for my work. I'll wait."

"Tell me," he said. "When Earth's enemies really do come from the stars, will your machines let you know it?"

"I trust they will."

"And then?"

"Then I notify the Defenders."

"After which your life's work is over?"

"Perhaps," I said.

"Why a whole guild of you, though? Why not one master center where the Watch is kept? Why a bunch of itinerant Watchers drifting endlessly from place to place?"

"The more vectors of detection," I said, "the greater the chance of early awareness of the invasion."

"Then an individual Watcher might well turn his machines on and not see anything, with an invader already here."

"It could happen. Therefore we practice redundancy."

"You carry it to an extreme, I sometimes think." Gormon laughed. "Do you actually believe an invasion is coming?"

"I do," I said stiffy. "Else my life was a waste."

"And why should the star people want Earth? What do we have here besides the remnants of old empires? What would they do with miserable Roum? With Perris? With Jorslem? Rotting cities! Idiot princes! Come, Watcher, admit it: the invasion's a myth, and you go through meaningless motions three times a day. Eh?"

"It is my craft and my science to Watch. It is yours to jeer. Each of us to our specialty, Gormon."

"Forgive me," he said with mock humility. "Go, then, and Watch."

"I shall."

Angrily I turned back to my

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cabinet of instruments, determined now to ignore any interruption, no matter how brutal. The stars were out; I gazed at the glowing constellations, and automatically my mind registered the many worlds. Let us Watch, I thought. Let us keep our vigil despite the mockers.

I entered the state of full Watchfulness.

I clung to the grips and permitted the surge of power to rush through me. I cast my mind to the heavens and searched for hostile entities. What ecstasy! What incredible splendor! I who had never left this small planet roved the black spaces of the void, glided from star to burning star, saw the planets spinning like tops. Faces stared back at me as I journeyed, some without eyes, some with many eyes, all the complexity of the many-peopled galaxy accessible to me. I spied out possible concentrations of inimical force. I inspected drilling-grounds and military encampments. I sought, as I had sought four times daily for all my adult life, for the invaders who had been promised us, the conquerors who at the end of days were destined to seize our tattered world.

I found nothing, and when I came up from my trance, sweaty and drained, I saw Avluela descending.

Feather-light she landed. Gormon called to her, and she ran, bare, her little breasts quivering, and he enfolded her smallness in his powerful arms, and they embraced, not passionately but joyously. When he released her she turned to me.

"Roum," she gasped. "*Roum!*"

"You saw it?"

"Everything! Thousands of people! Lights! Boulevards! A market! Broken buildings many cycles old! Oh, Watcher, how wonderful Roum is!"

"Your flight was a good one, then," I said.

"A miracle!"

"Tomorrow we go to dwell in Roum."

"No, Watcher, tonight, tonight!" She was girlishly eager, her face bright with excitement. "It's just a short journey more! Look, it's just over there!"

"We should rest first," I said. "We do not want to arrive weary in Roum."

"We can rest when we get there," Avluela answered. "Come! Pack everything! You've done your Watching, haven't you?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Then let's go. To Roum! To Roum!"

I looked in appeal at Gormon. Night had come; it was time to make camp, to have our few hours of sleep.

For once Gormon sided with

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me. He said the Avluela, "The Watcher's right. We can all use some rest. We'll go into Roum at dawn."

Avluela pouted. She looked more like a child than ever. Her wings drooped; her underdeveloped body slumped. Petulantly she closed her wings until they were mere fist-sized humps on her back and picked up the garments she had scattered on the road. She dressed while we made camp. I distributed food tablets; we entered our receptacles; I fell into troubled sleep and dreamed of Avluela limned against the crumbling moon and Gormon flying beside her. Two hours before dawn I arose and performed my first Watch of the new day, while they still slept. Then I aroused them, and we went onward toward the fabled imperial city, onward toward Roum.

III

The morning's light was bright and harsh, as though this were some young world newly created. The road was all but empty. People do not travel much in these latter days unless, like me, they are wanderers by habit and profession.

Occasionally we stepped aside to let a chariot of some member of the guild of Masters go by, drawn by a dozen expressionless neuters harnessed in series. Four such vehicles went by in the first two hours of the day, each shuttered and sealed to hide the Master's proud features from the gaze of such common folk as we. Several rollerwagons passed us, laden with produce, and a number of floaters soared overhead. Generally we had the road to ourselves, however.

The environs of Roum showed vestiges of antiquity: isolated columns, the fragments of an aqueduct transporting nothing from nowhere to nowhere, the portals of a vanished temple. That was the oldest Roum we saw, but there were accretions of the later Roums of subsequent cycles, the huts of peasants, the domes of power drains, the hulls of dwelling-towers. Infrequently we met with the burned-out shell of some ancient airship. Gormon examined everything, taking samples from time to time. Avluela looked, wide-eyed, saying nothing. We walked on, until the walls of the city loomed before us.

They were of a blue glossy stone, neatly joined, rising to a height of perhaps eight men. Our road pierced the wall through a corbelled arch. The gate stood open. As we approached the gate a figure came toward us, hooded, masked, a man of extraordinary height wearing the somber garb of the guild of Pilgrims. One does

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not approach such a person one's self, but one heeds him if he beckons. The Pilgrim beckoned.

Through his speaking grill he said, "Where from?"

"The south. I lived in Agupt a while, then crossed Land Bridge to Talya," I replied.

"Where bound?"

"Roum, a while."

"How goes the Watch?"

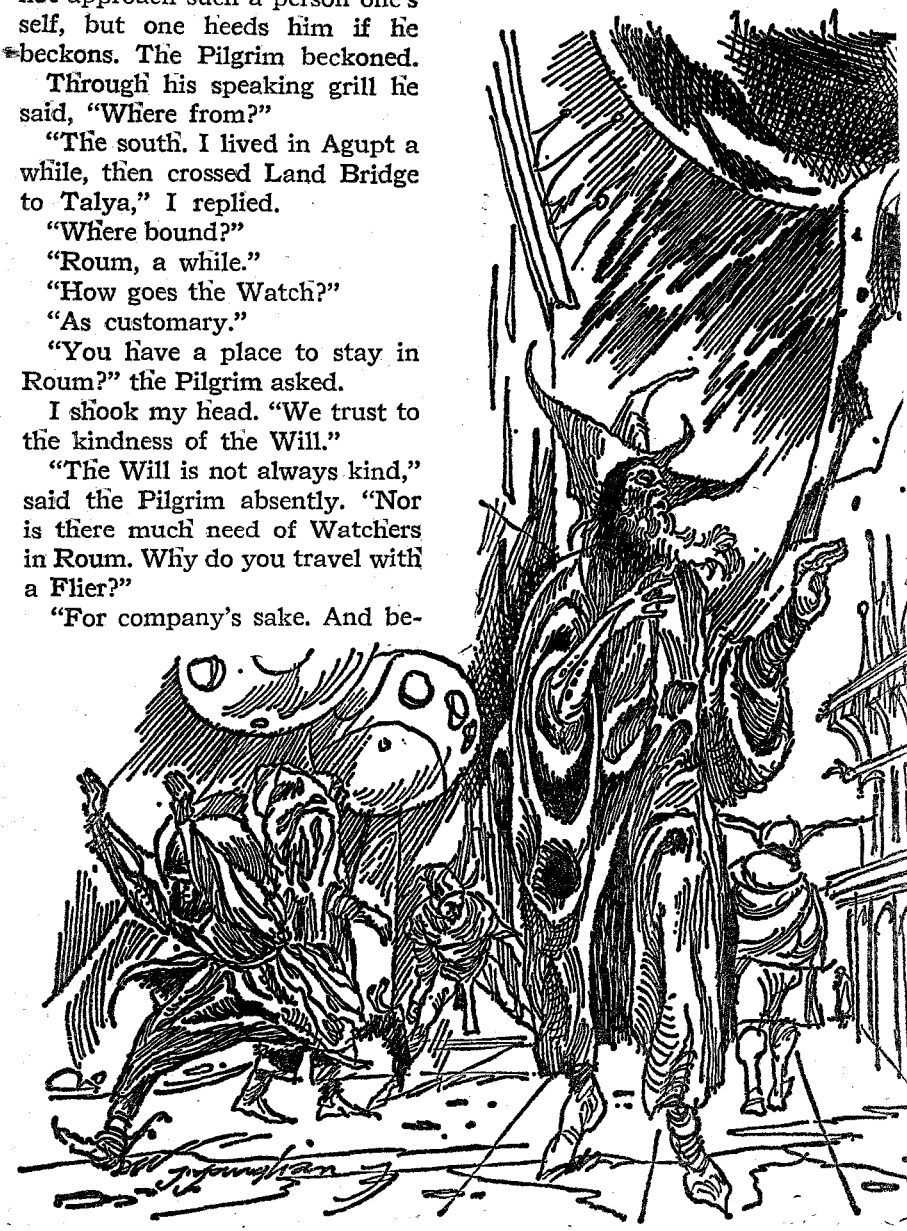
"As customary."

"You have a place to stay in Roum?" the Pilgrim asked.

I shook my head. "We trust to the kindness of the Will."

"The Will is not always kind," said the Pilgrim absently. "Nor is there much need of Watchers in Roum. Why do you travel with a Flier?"

"For company's sake. And be-



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cause she is young and needs protection."

"Who is the other one?"

"He is guildless, a Changeling."

"So I can see. But why is he with you?"

"He is strong and I am old, and so we travel together. Where are you bound, Pilgrim?"

"Jorslem. Is there another destination for my guild?"

I conceded the point with a shrug.

The Pilgrim said, "Why do you not come to Jorslem with me?"

"My road lies north now. Jorslem is in the south, close by Agupt."

"You have been to Agupt and not to Jorslem?" he said, puzzled.

"Yes. The time was not ready for me to see Jorslem."

"Come now. We will walk together on the road, Watcher, and we will talk of the old times and of the times to come, and I will assist you in your Watching and you will assist me in my communions with the Will. Is it agreed?"

It was a temptation. Before my eyes flashed the image of Jorslem the Golden, its holy buildings and shrines, its place of renewal where the old are made young, its spires, its tabernacles. Even though I am a man set in his ways, I was willing at the moment to abandon Roum and go with the Pilgrim to Jorslem.

I said, "And my companions —"

"Leave them. It is forbidden for me to travel with the guildless, and I do not wish to travel with a female. You and I, Watcher, will go to Jorslem together."

Avluela, who had been standing to one side frowning through all this colloquy, shot me a look of sudden terror.

"I will not abandon them," I said.

"Then I go to Jorslem alone," said the Pilgrim. Out of his robe stretched a bony hand, the fingers long and white and steady. I

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touched my fingers reverently to the tips of his and the Pilgrim said, "Let the Will give you mercy, friend Watcher. And when you reach Jorslem, search for me."

He moved on down the road without further conversation.

Gormon said to me, "You would have gone with him, wouldn't you?"

"I considered it."

"What could you find in Jorslem that isn't here? That's a holy city and so is this. Here you can rest a while. You're in no shape for more walking now."

"You may be right," I conceded, and with the last of my energy strode toward the gate of Roum.

Watchful eyes scanned us from slots in the wall. When we were at midpoint in the gate a fat, pockmarked Sentinel with sagging jowls halted us and asked our business in Roum. I stated my guild and purpose, and he gave a snort of disgust.

"Go elsewhere, Watcher! We need only useful men here."

"Watching has its uses," I said mildly.

"No doubt. No doubt." He squinted at Avluela. "Who's this? Watchers are celibates, no?"

"She is nothing more than a traveling companion."

The Sentinel guffawed coarsely. "It's a route you travel often, I wager! Not that there's much to her. What is she, thirteen, fourteen? Come here, child. Let me check you for contraband." He ran his hands quickly over her, scowling as he felt her breasts, then raising an eyebrow as he encountered the mounds of her wings below her shoulders. "What's this? What's this? More in back than in front! A Flier, are you? Very dirty business, Fliers consorting with foul old Watchers." He chuckled and put his hand on Avluela's body in a way that sent Gormon starting forward in fury, murder in his fire-circled eyes. I caught him in time and grasped his wrist with all my strength, holding him back lest he ruin the three of us by an attack on the Sentinel. He tugged at me, nearly pulling me over; then he grew calm and subsided, icily waiting as the fat one finished checking Avluela for "contraband."

At length the Sentinel turned in distaste to Gormon and said, "What kind of thing are you?"

"Guildless, your mercy," Gormon said in sharp tones. "The humble and worthless product of teratogenesis, and yet nevertheless a free man who desires entry to Roum."

"Do we need more monsters here?"

"I eat little and work hard."

"You'd work harder still if you were neutered," said the Sentinel.

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Gormon glowered. I said, "May we have entry?"

"A moment." The Sentinel donned his thinking cap and narrowed his eyes as he transmitted a message to the memory tanks. His face tensed with the effort; then it went slack, and moments later came the reply. We could not hear the transaction at all, but from his disappointed look it appeared evident that no reason had been found to refuse us admission to Roum.

"Go on in," he said. "The three of you. Quickly!"

We passed beyond the gate.

Gormon said, "I could have split him open with a blow."

"And be neutered by nightfall. A little patience, and we've come into Roum."

"The way he handled her —!"

"You take a very possessive attitude toward Avluela," I said. "Remember that she's a Flier, and not sexually available to the guildless."

Gormon ignored my thrust. "She arouses me no more than you do, Watcher. But it pains me to see her treated that way. I would have killed him if you hadn't held me back."

Avluela said, "Where shall we stay, now that we're in Roum?"

"First let me find the headquarters of my guild," I said. "I'll register at the Watchers' Inn. After that perhaps we'll hunt up the Fliers' Lodge for a meal."

"And then," said Gormon drily, "we'll go to the Guildless Gutter and beg for coppers."

"I pity you because you are a Changeling," I told him, "but I find it ungraceful of you to pity yourself. Come."

We walked up a cobbled, winding street away from the gate and into Roum itself. We were in the outer ring of the city, a residential section of low, squat houses topped by the unwieldy bulk of defense installations. Within lay the shining towers we had seen from the fields the night before; the remnant of ancient Roum, carefully preserved across ten thousand years or more; the market; the factory zone; the communications hump; the temples of the Will; the memory tanks; the sleepers' refuges; the outworlders' brothels; the governmental buildings; the headquarters of the various guilds.

At the corner, beside a Second Cycle building with walls of some rubbery texture, I found a public thinking cap and slipped it on my forehead. At once my thoughts raced down the conduit until they came to the interface that gave them access to one of the storage brains of a memory tank. I pierced the interface and saw the wrinkled brain itself, pale gray against the deep green of its

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housing. A Rememberer once told me that in cycles past men built machines to do their thinking for them, although these machines were hellishly expensive and required vast amounts of space and drank power like gluttons. That was not the worst of our forefathers' follies; but why build artificial brains when death each day liberates scores of splendid natural ones to hook into the memory tanks? Was it that they lacked the knowledge to use them? I find that hard to believe.

I gave the brain my guild identification and asked the coordinates of our inn. Instantly I received them, and we set out, Avluela on one side of me, Gormon on the other, myself wheeling as always the cart in which my instruments reside.

The city was crowded. I had not seen such throngs in sleepy, heat-fevered Agupt, nor at any other point on my northward journey. The streets were full of Pilgrims, secretive and masked. Jostling through them went busy Rememberers and glum Merchants and now and then the litter of a Master. Avluela saw a number of Fliers, but was barred by the tenets of her guild from greeting them until she had undergone her ritual purification. I regret to say that I spied many Watchers, all of whom looked upon me disdainfully and without welcome. I noted a good many Defenders and ample representation of such lesser guilds as Vendors, Servitors, Manufactories, Scribes, Communicants and Transporters. Naturally, a host of neuters went silently about their humble business, and numerous outworlders of all descriptions flocked the streets, most of them probably tourists, some here to do what business could be done with the sullen, poverty-blighted people of Earth. I noticed many Changelings limping furtively through the crowd, not one of them as proud of bearing as Gormon beside me. He was unique among his kind; the others, dappled and piebald and asymmetrical, limbless or overlimbed, deformed in a thousand imaginative and artistic ways, were slinkers, squinters, shufflers, hissers, creepers; they were cutpurses, brain-drainers, organ-peddlers, repentance-mongers, gleam-buyers, but none held himself upright as though he thought he were a man.

The guidance of the brain was exact, and in less than an hour of walking we arrived at the Watchers' Inn. I left Gormon and Avluela outside and wheeled my cart within.

Perhaps a dozen members of my guild lounged in the main hall. I gave them the customary

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sign, and they returned it languidly. Were these guardians on whom Earth's safety depended? Simpletons and weaklings!

"Where may I register?" I asked.

"New? Where from?"

"Agupt was my last place of registry."

"Should have stayed there. No need of Watchers here."

"Where may I register?"

A foppish youngster indicated a screen in the rear of the great room. I went to it, pressed my fingertips against it, was interrogated and gave my name, which a Watcher may utter only to another Watcher and within the precincts of an inn. A panel shot open, and a puffy-eyed man who wore the Watcher emblem on his right cheek and not on the left, signifying his high rank in the guild, spoke my name and said, "You should have known better than to come to Roum. We're over our quota."

"I claim lodging and employment nonetheless."

"A man with your sense of humor should have been born into the guild of Clowns," he said.

"I see no joke."

"Under laws promulgated by our guild in the most recent session an inn is under no obligation to take new lodgers once it has reached its assigned capacity. We are at our assigned capacity. Farewell, my friend."

I was aghast. "I know of no such regulation! This is incredible! For a guild to turn away a member from its own inn — when he arrives footsore and numb, a man of my age, having crossed Land Bridge out of Agupt, here as a stranger and hungry in Roum —"

"Why did you not check with us first?"

"I had no idea it would be necessary."

"The new regulations —"

"May the Will shrivel the new regulations!" I shouted. "I demand lodging! For one who has Watched since before you were born to be turned away —"

"Easy, brother, easy."

"Surely you have some corner where I can sleep — some crumbs to let me eat —"

Even as my tone had changed from bluster to supplication, his expression softened from indifference to mere disdain. "We have no room, we have no food. These are hard times for our guild, you know. There is talk that we will be disbanded altogether, as a useless luxury, a drain upon the Will's resources. We are very limited in our abilities. Because Roum has a surplus of Watchers, we all are on short rations as it is, and if we admit you our rations will be all the shorter."

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"But where will I go? What shall I do?"

"I advise you," he said blandly, "to throw yourself upon the mercy of the Prince of Roum."

IV

Outside, I told that to Gormon, and he doubled with laughter, guffawing so furiously that the striations on his lean cheeks blazed like bloody stripes. "The mercy of the Prince of Roum!" he repeated. "The mercy — of the Prince of Roum —!"

"It is customary for the unfortunate to seek the aid of the local ruler," I said coldly.

"The Prince of Roum knows no mercy," Gormon told me. "The Prince of Roum will feed you your own limbs to ease your hunger!"

"Perhaps," Avluela put in, "we should try to find the Fliers' Lodge. They'll feed us there."

"Not Gormon," I observed. "We have obligations to one another."

"We could bring food out to him," she said.

"I prefer to visit the court first," I insisted. "Let us make sure of our status. Afterward we can improvise living arrangements, if we must."

She yielded, and we made our way to the palace of the Prince of Roum, a massive building fronted by a colossal column-ringed plaza, on the far side of the river that splits the city. In the plaza we were accosted by mendicants of many sorts, some not even Earthborn. Something with ropy tendrils and a corrugated noseless face thrust itself at me and jabbered for alms until Gormon pushed it away, and moments later a second creature equally strange, its skin pocked with luminescent craters and its limbs studded with eyes, embraced my knees and pleaded in the name of the Will for my mercy. "I am only a poor Watcher," I said, indicating my cart, "and am here to gain mercy myself." But the being persisted, sobbing out its misfortunes in a blurred feathery voice, and in the end, to Gormon's immense disgust, I dropped a few food tablets into the shelf-like pouch on its chest. Then we muscled on toward the doors of the palace. At the portico a more horrid sight presented itself: a maimed Flier, fragile limbs bent and twisted, one wing half unfolded and severely cropped, the other missing altogether. The Flier rushed upon Avluela, called her by a name not hers, moistened her leggings with tears so copious that the fur of them grew matted and stained. "Sponsor me to the lodge," he appealed. "They have turned me away because I am crippled, but if you sponsor

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me —" Avluela explained that she could do nothing, that she was a stranger to this lodge. The broken Flier would not release her, and Gormon with great delicacy lifted him like the bundle of dry bones that he was, and set him aside. We stepped up onto the portico and at once were confronted by a trio of soft-faced neuters, who asked our business and admitted us quickly to the next line of barrier, which was manned by a pair of wizened Indexers. Speaking in unison, they queried us.

"We seek audience," I said. "A matter of mercy."

"The day of audience is four days hence," said the Indexer on the right. "We will enter your request on the rolls."

"We have no place to sleep!" Avluela burst out. "We are hungry! We —"

I hushed her. Gormon, meanwhile, was groping in the mouth of his overpocket. Bright things glimmered in his hand: pieces of gold, the eternal metal, stamped with hawk-nosed bearded faces. He had found them grubbing in the ruins. He tossed one coin to the Indexer who had refused us. The man snapped it from the air, rubbed his thumb roughly across its shining obverse, and dropped it instantly into a fold of his garment. The second Indexer waited expectantly. Smiling, Gormon gave him his coin.

"Perhaps," I said, "we can arrange for a special audience within."

"Perhaps you can," said one of the Indexers. "Go through."

And so we passed into the nave of the palace itself, and stood in that great echoing space, looking down the central aisle toward the shielded throne chamber at the apse. There were more beggars in here — licensed ones, holding hereditary concessions — and also throngs of Pilgrims, Communicants, Rememberers, Musicians, Scribes and Indexers. I heard muttered prayers: I smelled the scent of spicy incense; I felt the vibration of subterranean gongs. In cycles past this building had been a shrine of one of the old religions — the Christers, Gormon told me, making me suspect once more that he was a Rememberer masquerading as a Changeling — and it still maintained something of its holy character even though it served as Roum's seat of secular government. But how were we to get to see the Prince?

To my left I saw a small ornate chapel to which a line of prosperous-looking Merchants and Landholders was slowly entering. Peering past them, I noted three skulls mounted on an interrogation fixture — a memory-tank input —

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and beside them a burly Scribe. Telling Gormon and Avluela to wait for me in the aisle, I joined the line.

It moved infrequently, and nearly an hour passed before I reached the interrogation fixture. The skulls glared sightlessly at me; within their sealed crania nutrient fluids bubbled and gurgled, caring for the dead yet still functional brains whose billion billion synaptic units now served as incomparable mnemonic devices. The Scribe seemed aghast to find a Watcher in this line, but before he could challenge me I blurted, "I come as a stranger to claim the Prince's mercy. I and my companions are without lodging. My own guild has turned me away. What shall I do? How may I gain an audience?"

"Come back in four days."

"I've slept on the road for more days than that. Now I must rest."

"A public inn —"

"But I am guilded!" I protested. "The public inns would not admit me while my guild maintains an inn here, and my guild refuses me because of some new regulation, and — you see my predicament?"

In a wearied voice the Scribe said, "You may make application for a special audience. It will be denied. But you may apply."

"Where?"

"Here. State your purpose."

I identified myself to the skulls by my public designation, listed the names and status of my two companions, and explained my case. All this was absorbed and transmitted to the ranks of brains mounted somewhere in the depths of the city, and when I was done the Scribe said, "If the application is approved, you will be notified."

"Meanwhile where shall I stay?"

"Close to the palace, I would suggest."

I understood. I could join that legion of unfortunates packing the plaza. How many of them had requested some special favor of the Prince and were still there, months or years later, waiting to be summoned to the Presence? Sleeping on stone, begging for crusts, living in foolish hope —

But I had exhausted my avenues. I returned to Gormon and Avluela, told them of the situation, and suggested that we now attempt to hunt whatever accommodations we could. Gormon, guildless, was welcome at any of the squalid public inns maintained for his kind; Avluela could probably find residence at her own guild's lodge; only I would have to sleep in the streets, not for the first time. But I hoped that we would not have to sepa-

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rate. I had come to think of us as a family, strange thought though that was for a Watcher.

As we moved toward the exit my timepiece told me softly that the hour of Watching had come round again. It is my obligation and my privilege to tend to my Watching wherever I may be, regardless of the circumstances, whenever my hour comes round; and so I halted, opened the cart, activated the equipment. Gormon and Avluela stood beside me.

I saw smirks and open mockery on the faces of those who passed in and out of the palace. Watching is not held in very high repute, for we have Watched so long, and the promised enemy has never come. One has one's duties, comic though they may seem to others. What is a hollow ritual to some is a life's work to others. Doggedly I forced myself into a state of Watchfulness. The world melted away from me, and I plunged into the heavens. The familiar joy engulfed me; and I searched the familiar places, and some that were not so familiar, my amplified mind leaping through the galaxies in wild swoops. Was an armada massing? Were troops drilling for the conquest of Earth? Four times a day I watched, and the other members of my guild did the same, each at slightly different hours, so that no moment went by without some vigilant mind on guard. I do not believe that that is a foolish calling.

When I came up from my trance a brazen voice was crying, "— for the Prince of Roum! Make way for the Prince of Roum!"

I blinked and caught my breath and fought to shake off the last strands of my concentration. A gilded palanquin had emerged from the rear of the palace and was proceeding down the nave toward me, borne by a phalanx of neuters. Four men in the ornate costumes and brilliant masks of the guild of Masters flanked the litter, and it was preceded by a trio of Changelings, squat and broad, whose throats were so modified as to imitate the sounding-boxes of bullfrogs. They emitted a trumpet-like boom of majestic sound as they advanced.

It struck me as most strange that a prince would admit Changelings to his service, even ones as gifted as these.

My cart was blocking the progress of this magnificent procession, and hastily I struggled to close it and move it aside before the parade swept down upon me. Age and fear made my fingers tremble, and I could not make the sealings properly; while I fumbled in increasing clumsiness the strutting Changelings drew so

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close that the blare of their throats was deafening, and Gormon attempted to aid me, forcing me to hiss at him that it is forbidden for anyone not of my guild to touch the equipment. I pushed him away; and an instant later a vanguard of neuters descended on me and prepared to scourge me from the spot with sparkling whips.

"In the Will's name," I cried, "I am a Watcher!"

And in antiphonal response came the deep, calm, enormous reply, "Let him be. He is a Watcher."

All motion ceased. The Prince of Roum had spoken.

The neuters drew back. The Changelings halted their music. The bearers of the palanquin eased it to the floor. All those in the nave of the palace had pulled back, save only Gormon and Avluela and myself. The shimmering chain-curtains of the palanquins parted. Two of the Masters hurried forward and thrust their hands through the sonic barrier within, offering aid to their monarch. The barrier died away with a whimpering buzz.

The Prince of Roum appeared.

He was so young! He was nothing more than a boy, his hair full and dark, his face unlined. But he had been born to rule, and for all his youth he was as commanding as anyone I had ever seen. His lips were thin and tightly compressed; his aquiline nose was sharp and aggressive; his eyes, deep and cold, were infinite pools. He wore the jeweled garments of the guild of Dominators, but incised on his cheek was the double-barred cross of the Defenders, and around his neck he carried the dark shawl of the Rememberers. A Dominator may enroll in as many guilds as he pleases, and it would be a strange thing for a Dominator not also to be a Defender; but it startled me to find this prince a Rememberer as well. That is not normally a guild for the fierce.

He looked at me with little interest and said, "You choose an odd place to do your Watching, old man."

"The hour chose the place, sire," I replied. "I was there, and my duty compelled me. I had no way of knowing that you were about to come forth."

"Your Watching found no enemies?"

"None, sire."

I was about to press my luck, to take advantage of the unexpected appearance of the Prince to beg for his aid; but his interest in me died like a guttering candle as I stood there, and I did not dare call to him when his head had turned. He eyed Gormon a long moment, frowning and tug-

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ging at his chin. Then his gaze fell on Avluela. His eyes brightened. His jaw-muscles flickered. His delicate nostrils widened. "Come up here, little Flier," he said, beckoning. "Are you this Watcher's friend?"

She nodded, terrified.

The Prince held out a hand to her and grasped; she floated up onto the palanquin, and with a grin so evil it seemed a parody of wickedness the young Dominator drew her through the curtain. Instantly a pair of Masters restored the sonic barrier, but the procession did not move on. I stood mute. Gormon beside me was frozen, his powerful body rigid as a rod. I wheeled my cart to a less conspicuous place. Long moments passed. The courtiers remained silent, discreetly looking away from the palanquin.

At length the curtain parted once more. Avluela came stumbling out, her face pale, her eyes blinking rapidly. She looked dazed. Streaks of sweat gleamed on her cheeks. She nearly fell, and a neuter caught her and swung her down to floor level. Beneath her jacket her wings were partly erect, giving her a hunchbacked look and telling me that she was in great emotional distress. In ragged sliding steps she came to us, quivering, wordless; she darted a glance at me and flung herself against Gormons chest.

The bearers lifted the palanquin. The Prince of Roum went out from his palace.

When he was gone, Avluela stammered hoarsely, "The Prince has granted us lodging in the royal hostelry!"

V

The hostelkeepers, of course, would not believe us.

Guests of the Prince are housed in the royal hostelry, which is to the rear of the palace in a small garden of frostflowers and blossoming ferns. The usual inhabitants of such a hostelry are Masters and an occasional Dominator; sometimes a particularly important Rememberer on an errand of research will win a niche there, or some highly placed Defender visiting for purposes of strategic planning. To house a Flier in a royal hostelry would be distinctly odd; to admit a Watcher would be unlikely; to take in a Changeling or some other guildless person would be improbable beyond comprehension. When we presented ourselves, therefore, we were met by Servitors whose attitude was at first one of high humor at our joke, then of irritation, finally of scorn. "Get away," they told us ultimately. "Scum! Rabble!"

Avluela said in a grave voice, "The Prince has granted us lodg-

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ing here, and you may not refuse us."

"Away! Away!"

One snaggletoothed Servitor produced a neural truncheon and brandished it in Gormon's face, passing a foul remark about his guildlessness. Gormon slapped the truncheon from his grasp, oblivious to the painful sting, and kicked the man in his gut, so that he coiled and fell over, puking. Instantly a throng of neuters came rushing from within the hostelry. Gormon seized another of the Servitors and hurled him into the midst of them, turning them into a muddled mob. Wild shouts and angry cursing cries attracted the attention of a venerable Scribe who waddled to the door, bellowed for silence, and interrogated us. "That's easily checked," he said, when Avluela had told the story. To a Servitor he said contemptuously, "Send a think to the Indexers fast!"

In time the confusion was untangled, and we were admitted. We were given separate but adjoining rooms. I had never known such luxury before, and perhaps never shall again. The rooms were long, high, and deep. One entered them through telescopic pits keyed to one's own thermal output, to assure privacy. Lights glowed at the resident's merest nod, for hanging from ceiling globes and nestling in cupolas on the walls were spicules of slavelight from one of the Brightstar worlds, trained through suffering to obey such commands. The windows came and went at the dweller's whim. When not in use they were concealed by streamers of quasi-sentient outworld gauzes, which not only were decorative in their own right but functioned as monitors to produce delightful scents according to requisitioned patterns. The rooms were equipped with individual thinking caps connected to the main memory banks. They likewise had conduits that summoned Servitors, Scribes, Indexers or Musicians as required. Of course, a man of my own human guild would not deign to make use of other human beings that way, out of fear of their glowering resentment. But in any case I had little need of them.

I did not ask of Avluela what had occurred in the Prince's palanquin to bring us such bounty. I could well imagine, as could Gormon, whose barely suppressed inner rage was eloquent of his never-admitted love for my pale, slender little Flier.

We settled in. I placed my cart beside the window, draped it with gauzes, and left it in readiness for my next period of Watching. I cleaned my body of grime while entities mounted in the wall sang me to peace. Later

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I ate. Afterwards Avluela came to me, refreshed, relaxed, and sat beside me in my room as we talked quietly of our recent experiences.

Gormon did not appear for hours. I thought that perhaps he had left this hostelry altogether, finding the atmosphere to rarefied for him, and had sought company among his own guildless kind. But at twilight Avluela and I walked in the cloistered courtyard of the hostelry and mounted a ramp to watch the stars emerge in Roum's sky, and Gormon was there. With him was a lanky and emaciated man in a Remembrer's shawl; they were talking in low tones.

Gormon nodded to me and said, "Watcher, I want you to meet my new friend."

The emaciated one fingered his shawl. "I am the Rememberer Basil," he intoned, in a voice as thin as a fresco that has been peeled from its wall. "I have come from Perris to delve into the mysteries of Roum. I shall be here many years."

"The Rememberer has fine stories to tell," said Gormon. "He is among the foremost of his guild. As you approached, he was describing to me the techniques by which the past is revealed. They drive a trench through the strata of Third Cycle deposits, you see, and with vacuum cores they lift the molecules of earth to lay bare the ancient layers."

"We have found," Basil said, "the catacombs of Imperial Roum, and the rubble of the Time of Sweeping, and books inscribed on slivers of white metal, written toward the close of the Second Cycle. All these go to Perris for examination and classification and decipherment; then they return. Does the past interest you, Watcher?"

"To some extent." I smiled. "This Changeling here shows much more fascination for it. I sometimes suspect his authenticity. Would you recognize a Rememberer in disguise?"

Basil scrutinized Gormon, lingering over the bizarre features, the excessively muscular frame. "He is no Rememberer," he said at length. "But I agree that he has antiquarian interests. He has asked me many profound questions."

"Such as?"

"He wishes to know the origin of guilds. He asks the name of the genetic surgeon who crafted the first true-breeding Fliers. He wonders why there are Changelings, and if they are truly under the curse of the Will."

"And do you have answers for these?" I asked.

"For some," said Basil. "For some."

"The origin of guilds?"

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"To give structure and meaning to a society that has suffered defeat and destruction," said the Rememberer. "At the end of the Second Cycle all was in flux. No man knew his rank nor his purpose. Through our world strode haughty outworlders who looked upon us all as worthless. It was necessary to establish fixed frames of reference by which one man might know his value beside another. So the first guilds appeared: Dominators, Masters, Merchants, Manufactories, Vendors and Servitors. Then came Scribes, Musicians, Clowns and Transporters. Afterwards Indexers became necessary, and then Watchers and Defenders. When the years of Magic gave us Fliers and Changelings, those guilds were added, and then the guildless ones, the neuters, were produced, so that—"

"But surely the Changelings are guildless too!" said Avluela.

The Rememberer looked at her for the first time. "Who are you?"

"Avluela of the Fliers. I travel with this Watcher and this Changeling."

Basil said, "As I have been telling the Changeling here, in the early days his kind was guilded. The guild was dissolved a thousand years ago by order of the Council of Dominators after an attempt by a disreputable Changeling faction to seize control of the holy places of Jorslem. Since that time Changelings have been guildless, ranking only above neuters."

"I never knew that," I said.

"You are no Rememberer," said Basil smugly. "It is our craft to uncover the past."

"True. True."

Gormon said, "And today, how many guilds there are?"

Discomfited, Basil replied vaguely, "At least a hundred, my friend. Some are quite small; some are local. I am concerned only with the original guilds and their immediate successors; what has happened in the past few hundred years is in the province of others. Shall I requisition an information for you?"

"Never mind," Gormon said. "It was only an idle question."

"Your curiosity is well developed," said the Rememberer.

"I find the world and all it contains extremely fascinating. Is this sinful?"

"It is strange," said Basil. "The guildless rarely look beyond their own horizons."

VI

A Servitor appeared. With a mixture of awe and contempt he genuflected before Avluela and said, "The Prince has returned. He desires your company in the palace at this time."

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Terror glimmered in Avluela's eyes. But to refuse was inconceivable. "Shall I come with you?" she asked.

"Please. You must be robed and perfumed. He wishes you to come to him with your wings open, as well."

Avluela nodded. The Servitor led her away.

We remained on the ramp a while longer. The Rememberer Basil talked of the old days of Roum, and I listened, and Gormon peered into the gathering darkness. Eventually, his throat dry, the Rememberer excused himself and moved solemnly away. A few moments later, in the courtyard below us, a door opened and Avluela emerged, walking as though she was of the guild of Somnambulists, not of Fliers.

She was nude, and her fragile body gleamed ghostly white in the starbeams. Her wings were spread and fluttered slowly in a somber systole and diastole. One Servitor grasped each of her elbows; they seemed to be propelling her toward the palace as though she were but a dreamed facsimile of herself and not a real woman.

"Fly, Avluela, fly," Gormon whispered. "Escape while you can!"

She disappeared into a side entrance of the palace.

The Changeling looked at me. "She has sold herself to the Prince to provide lodging for us."

"So it seems."

"I could smash down that palace! "

"You love her?"

"It should be obvious."

"Cure yourself," I advised. "You are an unusual man, but still a Flier is not for you. Particularly a Flier who has shared the bed of the Prince of Roum."

"She goes from my arms to his."

I was staggered. "You've known her?"

"More than once," he said, smiling sadly. "At the moment of ecstasy her wings thrash like leaves in a storm."

I gripped the railing of the ramp so that I would not tumble into the courtyard. The stars whirled overhead; the old moon and its two blank-faced consorts leaped and bobbed. I was shaken without fully understanding the cause of my emotion. Was it wrath that Gormon had dared to violate a canon of the law? Was it a manifestation of those pseudo-parental feelings I had toward Avluela? Or was it mere envy of Gormon for daring to commit a sin beyond my capacity, though not beyond my desires?

I said, "They could burn your brain for that. They could

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mince your soul. And now you make me an accessory."

"What of it? That Prince commands, and he gets — but others have been there before him. I had to tell someone."

"Enough. Enough."

"Will we see her again?"

"Princes tire quickly of their women. A few days, perhaps a single night — then he will throw her back to us. And perhaps then we shall have to leave this hostelry." I sighed. "At least we'll have known it a few nights more than we deserved."

"Where will you go then?" Gormon asked.

"I will stay in Roum a while."

"Even if you sleep in the streets? There does not seem to be much demand for Watchers here."

"I'll manage," I said. "Then I may go toward Perris."

"To learn from the Rememberers?"

"To see Perris. What of you? What do you want in Roum?"

"Avluela."

"Stop that talk!"

"Very well," he said, and his smile was bitter. "But I will stay here until the Prince is through with her. Then she will be mine, and we'll find ways to survive. The guildless are resourceful. They have to be. Maybe we'll scrounge lodgings in Roum a while, and then follow you to Perris. If you're willing to travel with monsters and faithless Fliers."

I shrugged. "We'll see about that when the time comes."

"Have you ever been in the company of a Changeling before?"

"Not often. Not for long."

"I'm honored." He drummed on the parapet. "Don't cast me off, Watcher. I have reason for wanting to stay with you."

"Which is?"

"To see your face on the day your machines tell you that the invasion of Earth has begun."

I let myself sag forward, shoulders drooping. "You'll stay with me a long time, then."

"Don't you believe the invasion is coming?"

"Some day. Not soon."

Gormon chuckled. "You're wrong. It's almost here."

"You don't amuse me."

"What is it, Watcher? Have you lost your faith? It's been known for a thousand years: another race covets Earth and owns it by treaty and will some day come to collect. That much was decided at the end of the Second Cycle."

"I know all that, and I am no Rememberer." Then I turned to him and spoke words I never thought I would say aloud. "For twice your lifetime, Changeling,

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I've listened to the stars and done my Watching. Something done that often loses meaning. Say your own name ten thousand times and it will be an empty sound. I have Watched, and Watched well, and in the dark hours of the night I sometimes think I Watch for nothing, that I have wasted my life. There is a pleasure in Watching, but perhaps there is no real purpose."

His hand encircled my wrist. "Your confession is as shocking as mine. Keep your faith, Watcher. The invasion comes!"

"How could you possibly know?"

"The guildless also have their skills."

The conversation distressed me. I said, "Is it painful to be guildless?"

"One grows reconciled. And there are certain freedoms to compensate for the lack of status. I may speak freely to all."

"I notice."

"I move freely. I am always sure of food and lodging, though the food may be rotten and the lodging poor. Women are attracted to me despite all prohibitions. Because of them, perhaps. I am untroubled by ambitions."

"Never desire to rise above your rank?"

"Never."

"You might have been happier as a Rememberer."

"I am happy now. I can have a Rememberer's pleasures without his responsibility."

"How smug you are!" I cried. "To make a virtue of guildlessness!"

"How else does one endure the weight of the Will?" He looked toward the palace. The humble rise. The mighty fall. Take this as prophesy, Watcher: that lusty Prince in there will know more of life before summer comes. I'll rip out his eyes for taking her!"

"Strong words. You bubble with treason tonight."

"Take it as prophesy."

"You can't get close to him," I said. Then, irritated for taking his foolishness seriously, I added, "And why blame him? He does only as princes do. Blame the girl for going to him. She might have refused."

"And lost her wings. Or died. No, she had no choice. I do!" In a sudden terrible gesture the Changeling held out thumb and forefinger, double-jointed, long-nailed, and plunged them forward into imagined eyes. "Wait," he said. "You'll see!"

In the courtyard two Chronomancers appeared, set up the apparatus of their guild and lit tapers by which to read the shape of tomorrow. A sickly odor of pallid smoke rose to my nostrils. I had lost further desire to speak with the Changeling now.

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"It grows late," I said. "I need rest, and soon I must do my Watching."

"Watch carefully," Gormon told me.

VII

In my chamber by night I performed my fourth and last Watch of that long day, and for the first time in my life I detected an anomaly. I could not interpret it. It was an obscure sensation, a mingling of tastes and sounds, a feeling of being in contact with some colossal mass. Worried, I clung to my instruments far longer than usual, but perceived no more clearly at the end of my seance than at its commencement.

Afterward I wondered about my obligations.

Watchers are trained from childhood to be swift to sound the alarm; and the alarm must be sounded when the Watcher judges the world in peril. Was I now obliged to notify the Defenders? Four times in my life the alarm had been given, on each occasion in error; and each Watcher who had thus touched off a false mobilization had suffered a fearful loss of status. One had contributed his brain to the memory banks; one had become a neuter out of shame; one had smashed his instruments and gone to live among the guildless; and one, vainly attempting to continue in his profession, had discovered himself mocked by all his comrades. I saw no virtue in scorning one who had delivered a false alarm; for was it not preferable for a Watcher to cry out too soon than not at all? But those were the customs of our guild, and I was constrained by them.

I evaluated my position and decided that I did not have valid grounds for an alarm.

I reflected that Gormon had placed suggestive ideas in my mind that evening. I might possibly be reacting only to his peering talk of imminent invasion.

I could not act. I dared not jeopardize my standing by hasty outcry. I mistrusted my own emotional state.

I gave no alarm.

Seething, confused, my soul roiling, I closed my cart and let myself sink into a drugged sleep.

At dawn I woke and rushed to the window, expecting to find invaders in the streets. But all was still. A winter grayness hung over the courtyard, and sleepy Servitors pushed passive neuters about. Uneasily I did my first Watching of the day, and to my relief the strangeness of the night before did not return, although I had it in mind that my sensitivity

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is always greater at night than upon arising.

I ate and went to the courtyard. Gormon and Avluela were already there. She looked fatigued and downcast, depleted by her night with the Prince of Roum, but I said nothing to her about it. Gormon, slouching disdainfully against a wall embellished with the shells of radiant mollusks, said to me, "Did your Watching go well? "

"Well enough."

"What of the day?"

"Out to roam Roum," I said. "Will you come? Avluela? Gormon?"

"Surely," he said, and she gave a faint nod, and, like the tourists we were, we set off to inspect the splendid city of Roum.

Gormon acted as our guide to the jumbled pasts of Roum, belying his claim never to have been here before. As well as any Rememberer he described the things we saw as we walked the winding streets. All the scattered levels of thousands of years were exposed. We saw the power domes of the Second Cycle, and the Colosseum where at an unimaginably early date man and beast contended like jungle creatures. In the broken hull of that building of horrors Gormon told us of the savagery of that unimaginably ancient time. "They fought," he said, "naked before huge throngs. With bare hands men challenged beasts called lions, great hairy cats with swollen heads; and when the lion lay in its gore the victor turned to the Prince of Roum and asked to be pardoned for whatever crime it was that had cast him into the arena. And if he had fought well, the Prince made a gesture with his hand, and the man was freed." Gormon made the gesture for us: a thumb upraised and jerked backward over the right shoulder several times. "But if the man had shown cowardice, or if the lion had distinguished itself in the manner of its dying, the Prince made another gesture, and the man was condemned to be slain by a second beast." Gormon showed us that gesture too: the middle finger jutting upward from a clenched fist and lifted in a short sharp thrust.

"How are these things known?" Avluela asked, but Gormon pretended not to hear her.

We saw the line of fusion pylons built early in the Third Cycle to draw energy from the world's core, and still functioning, although stained and corroded. We saw the shattered stump of a Second Cycle weather machine, still a mighty column at least twenty men high. We saw a hill on which white marble relics of First Cycle Roum sprouted like pale clumps of winter deathflowers. Penetrating toward the

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inner part of the city, we came upon the embankment of defensive amplifiers waiting in readiness to hurl the full impact of the Will against invaders. We viewed a market where visitors from the stars haggled with peasants for excavated fragments of antiquity. Gormon strode into the crowd and made several purchases. We came to a flesh house for travelers from afar, where one could buy anything from quasi-life to mounds of passion-ice. We ate at a small restaurant by the edge of the river Tver, where guildless ones were served without ceremony, and at Gormon's insistence we dined on mounds of a soft doughy substance.

Afterward we passed through a covered arcade in whose many aisles plump Vendors peddled star-goods, costly trinkets from Afreek and the flimsy constructs of the local Manufactories. Just beyond we emerged in a plaza that contained a fountain in the shape of a boat, and to the rear of this rose a flight of cracked and battered stone stairs ascending to a zone of rubble and weeds. Gormon beckoned, and we scrambled into this dismal area, passing rapidly through it to a place where a sumptuous palace, by its looks early Second Cycle or even First, brooded over a sloping vegetated hill.

"They say this is the center of the world," Gormon declared. "In Jorslem one finds another place that also claims the honor. They mark the spot here by a map."

"How can the world have one center," Avluela asked, "when it is a sphere?"

Gormon laughed. We went in. Within, in wintry darkness, there stood a colossal jeweled globe lit by some inner glow.

"Here is your world," said Gormon, gesturing grandly.

"Oh!" Avluela gasped. "Everything! Everything is here!"

The map was a masterpiece of craftsmanship. It showed natural contours and elevations; its seas seemed deep liquid pools; its deserts were so parched as to make thirst spring in one's mouth; it cities swirled with vigor and life. I beheld the continents, Eyrop, Afreek, Ais, Stralya. I saw the vastness of Earth Ocean. I traversed the golden span of Land Bridge, which I had crossed so toilfully on foot not long before. Avluela rushed forward and pointed to Roum, to Agupt, to Jorslem, to Perris. She tapped the globe at the high mountains north of Hind and said softly, "This is where I was born, where the ice lives, where the mountains touch the moons. Here is where the Fliers have their kingdom." She ran a finger westward toward Pars and beyond it into the ter-

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rible Arban Desert, and on to Agupt. "This is where I flew. By night, when I left my girlhood. We all must fly, and I flew here. A hundred times I thought I would die. Here, here in the desert, sand in my throat as I flew, sand beating against my wings — I was forced down, I lay naked on the hot sand for days, and another Flier saw me, he came down to me and pitied me, and lifted me up, and when I was aloft my strength returned, and we flew on toward Agupt. And he died over the sea. His life stopped, though he was young and strong, and he fell down into the sea, and I flew down to be with him, and the water was hot even at night. I drifted, and morning came, and I saw the living stones growing like trees in the water, and the fish of many colors, and they came and pecked at his flesh as he floated with his wings outspread on the water, and I left him, I thrust him down to rest there, and I rose, and I flew on to Agupt, alone, frightened, and there I met you, Watcher." Timidly she smiled to me. "Show us the place where you were young, Watcher."

Painfully, for I was suddenly stiff at the knees, I hobbled to the far side of the globe. Avluela followed me. Gormon hung back, as though not interested at all. I pointed to the scattered islands rising in two long strips from Earth Ocean — the remnants of the Lost Continents.

"Here," I said, indicating my native island in the west. "I was born here."

"So far away!" Avluela cried.

"And so long ago," I said. "In the middle of the Second Cycle, it sometimes seems to me."

"No! That is not possible!" But she looked at me as though it might just be true that I was thousands of years old.

I smiled and touched her satiny cheek. "It only seems that way to me," I said.

"When did you leave your home?"

"When I was twice your age," I said. "I came first to here." I indicated the eastern group of islands. "I spent a dozen years as a Watcher on Palash. Then the Will moved me to cross Earth Ocean to Afreek. I came. I lived a while in the hot countries. I went on to Agupt. I met a certain small Flier." Falling silent, I looked a long while at the islands that had been my home, and within my mind my image changed from the gaunt and eroded thing I am today, and I saw myself young and well fleshed, climbing the green mountains and swimming in the chill sea, and doing my Watching at the rim of a white beach hammered by surf.

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While I brooded Avluela turned away from me to Gormon and said, "Now you. Show us where you come from, Changeling!"

Gormon shrugged. "The place does not appear to be on this globe."

"But that's *impossible!*"

"Is it?" he asked.

She pressed him, but he evaded her, and we passed through a side exit and into the streets.

VIII

I was growing tired, but Avluela hungered for this city, wishing to devour it all in an afternoon, and we went on through a maze of interlocking streets, through a zone of sparkling mansions of Masters and Merchants, and through a foul den of Servitors and Vendors that extended into subterranean catacombs, and to a place where Clowns and Musicians resorted, and to another where the guild of Somnambulists begged us to come inside and buy the truth that comes with trances. Avluela urged us to go, but Gormon shook his head and I smiled, and we moved on. Now we were at the edge of a park close to the city's core. Here the citizens of Roum promenaded with an energy rarely seen in hot Agupt, and we joined the parade.

"Look there!" Avluela said. "How bright it is!"

She pointed toward the shining arc of a dimensional sphere enclosing some relic of the ancient city. Shading my eyes, I could make out a weathered stone wall within, and a knot of people. Gormon said, "It is the Mouth of Truth."

"What is that?" Avluela asked.

"Come. See."

A line progressed into the sphere. We joined it and soon were at the lip of the interior, peering at the timeless region just across the threshold. Why this relic and so few others had been accorded such special protection I did not know, and I asked Gormon, whose knowledge was so unaccountably as profound as any Rememberer's, and he replied, "Because this is the realm of certainty, where what one says is absolutely congruent with what actually is the case."

"I don't understand," said Avluela.

"It is impossible to lie in this place," Gormon told her. "Can you imagine any relic more worthy of protection?" He stepped across the entry duct, blurring as he did so, and I followed him quickly within. Avluela hesitated. It was a long moment before she entered; she paused a moment on the very threshold, seemingly buffeted by the wind that blew along the line of demarcation between the outer world and the

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pocket universe in which we stood.

An inner compartment held the Mouth of Truth itself. The line extended toward it, and a solemn Indexer was controlling the flow of entry to the tabernacle. It was a while before we three were permitted to go in. We found ourselves before the ferocious head of a monster in high relief, affixed to an ancient wall pockmarked by time. The monster's jaws gaped; the open mouth was a dark and sinister hole. Gormon nodded, inspecting it, as though he seemed pleased to find it exactly as he had thought it would be.

"What do we do?" Avluela asked.

Gormon said, "Watcher, put your right hand into the Mouth of Truth."

Frowning, I complied.

"Now," said Gormon, "one of us asks a question. You must answer it. If you speak anything but the truth, the mouth will close and sever your hand."

"No!" Avluela cried.

I stared uneasily at the stone jaws rimming my wrist. A Watcher without both his hands is a man without a craft; in Second Cycle days one might obtain a prosthesis more artful than one's original hand, but the Second Cycle had long ago been concluded, and such niceties were not to be purchased on Earth nowadays.

"How is such a thing possible?" I asked.

"The Will is unusually strong in these precincts," Gormon replied. "It distinguishes sternly between truth and untruth. To the rear of this wall sleeps a trio of Somnambulists through whom the Will speaks, and they control the Mouth. Do you fear the Will, Watcher?"

"I fear my own tongue."

"Be brave. Never has a lie been told before this wall. Never has a hand been lost."

"Go ahead, then," I said. "Who will ask me a question?"

"I," said Gormon. "Tell me, Watcher: all pretense aside, would you say that a life spent in Watching has been a life spent wisely?"

I was silent a long moment, rotating my thoughts, eyeing the jaws.

At length I said, "To devote one's self to vigilance on behalf of one's fellow man is perhaps the noblest purpose one can serve."

"Careful!" Gormon cried in alarm.

"I am not finished," I said.

"Go on."

"But to devote one's self to vigilance when the enemy is an imaginary one is idle, and to congratulate one's self for looking long

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and well for a foe that is not coming is foolish and sinful. My life has been a waste."

The jaws of the Mouth of Truth did not quiver.

I removed my hand. I stared at it as though it had newly sprouted from my wrist. I felt suddenly several cycles old. Avluela, her eyes wide, her hands to her lips, seemed shocked by what I had said. My own words appeared to hang congealed in the air before the hideous idol.

"Spoken honestly," said Gormon, "although without much mercy for yourself. You judge yourself too harshly, Watcher."

"I spoke to save my hand," I said. "Would you have had me lie?"

He smiled. To Avluela the Changeling said, "Now it's your turn."

Visibly frightened, the little Flier approached the Mouth. Her dainty hand trembled as she inserted it between the slabs of cold stone. I fought back an urge to rush toward her and pull her free of that devilish grimacing head.

"Who will question her?" I asked.

"I," said Gormon.

Avluela's wings stirred faintly beneath her garments. Her face grew pale; her nostrils flickered, her upper lip slid over the lower one. She stood slouched against the wall, staring in horror at the termination of her arm. Outside the chamber vague faces peered at us, lips moved in what no doubt were expressions of impatience over our lengthy visit to the Mouth; but we heard nothing. The atmosphere around us was warm and clammy, with a musty tang like that which would come from a well that was driven through the structure of Time.

Gormon said slowly, "This night past you allowed your body to be possessed by the Prince of Roum. Before that, you granted yourself to the Changeling Gormon, although such liaisons are forbidden by custom and law. Much prior to that you were the mate of a Flier, now deceased. You may have had other men, but I know nothing of them, and for the purposes of my question they are not relevant. Tell me this, Avluela: which of the three gave you the most intense physical pleasure, which of the three aroused your deepest emotions, and which of the three would you choose as a mate, if you were choosing a mate?"

I wanted to protest that the Changeling had asked her three questions, not one, and so had taken unfair advantage. But I had no chance to speak, because Avluela replied unfalteringly, hand wedged deep into the Mouth

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of Truth, "The Prince of Roum gave me greater pleasure of the body than I had ever known before, but he is cold and cruel, and I despise him. My dead Flier I loved more deeply than any person before or since, but he was weak, and I would not have wanted a weakling as a mate. You, Gormon, seem almost a stranger to me even now, and I feel that I know neither your body nor your soul, and yet, though the gulf between us is so wide, it is you with whom I would spend my days to come."

She drew her hand from the Mouth of Truth.

"Well spoken!" said Gormon, though the accuracy of her words had clearly wounded as well as pleased him. "Suddenly you find eloquence, eh, when the circumstances demand it? And now the turn is mine to risk my hand."

He neared the Mouth. I said, "You have asked the first two questions. Do you wish to finish the job and ask the third as well?"

"Hardly," he said. He made a negligent gesture with his free hand. "Put your heads together and agree on a joint question."

Avluela and I conferred. With uncharacteristic forwardness she proposed a question; and since it was the one I would have asked, I accepted and told her to ask it.

She said, "When we stood before the globe of the world, Gormon, I asked you to show me the place where you were born, and you said you were unable to find it on the map. That seemed most strange. Tell me now: are you what you say you are, a Changeling who wanders the world?"

He replied, "I am not."

In a sense he had satisfied the question as Avluela had phrased it; but it went without saying that his reply was inadequate, and without removing his hand from the Mouth of Truth he continued, "I did not show my birthplace to you on the globe because I was born nowhere on this globe, but on a world of a star I must not name. I am no Changeling in your meaning of the word, though by some definitions I am, for my body is somewhat disguised, and on my own world I wear a different flesh. I have lived here ten years."

"What was your purpose in coming to Earth?" I asked.

"I am obliged only to answer one question," said Gormon. Then he smiled. "But I give you an answer anyway: I was sent to Earth in the capacity of a military observer, to prepare the way for the invasion for which you have Watched so long and in which you have ceased to believe, and which will be upon you in a matter now of some hours."

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"Lies!" I bellowed "All *lies!*"

Gormon laughed. And drew his hand from the Mouth of Truth, intact, unharmed.

IX

Numb with confusion, I fled with my cart of instruments from that gleaming sphere and emerged into a street suddenly cold and dark. Night had come with winter's swiftness; it was almost the ninth hour, and almost the time for me to Watch once more.

Gormon's mockery thundered in my brain. He had arranged everything: he had maneuvered us into the Mouth of Truth, he had wrung a confession of lost faith from me and a confession of a different sort from Avluela, he had mercilessly volunteered information he need not have revealed, spoken words calculated to split me to the core.

Was the Mouth of Truth a fraud? Could Gormon lie and emerge unscathed?

Never since I first took up my tasks had I Watched at anything but my appointed hours. This was a time of crumbling realities; I could not wait for the ninth hour to come round. Crouching in the windy street, I opened my cart, readied my equipment and sank like a diver into Watchfulness.

My amplified consciousness roared toward the stars.

Godlike I roamed infinity. I felt the rush of the solar wind, but I was no Flier to be hurled to destruction by that pressure, and I soared past it, beyond the reach of those angry particles of light, into the blackness at the edge of the sun's dominion. Down upon me there beat a different pressure.

Starships coming near.

Not the tourist lines, bringing sightseers to gape at our diminished world. Not the registered mercantile transport vessels, nor the scoopships that collect the interstellar vapors, nor the resort craft on their hyperbolic orbits.

These were military craft, dark, alien, menacing. I could not tell their number; I knew only that they sped Earthward at many lights, nudging a cone of deflected energies before them, and it was that cone than I sensed, that I had felt also the night before, booming into my mind through my instruments, engulfing me like a cube of crystal through which stress patterns play and shine.

All my life I had Watched for this.

I had been trained to sense it. I had prayed that I never would sense it, and then in my emptiness I had prayed that I *would* sense it, and then I had ceased to believe in it. And then by grace

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of the Changeling Gormon I had sensed it after all, Watching ahead of my hour, crouching in a cold Roumish street just outside the Mouth of Truth.

In his training a Watcher is instructed to break from his Watchfulness as soon as his observations are confirmed by a careful check, so that he can sound the alarm. Obediently I made my check, shifting from one channel to another to another, triangulating and still picking up that foreboding sensation of titanic force rushing upon Earth at unimaginable speed.

Either I was deceived, or the invasion was come. But I could not shake from my trance to give the alarm.

Lingeringly, lovingly, I drank in the sensory data for what seemed like hours. I fondled my equipment, draining from it the total affirmation of faith that my readings gave me. Dimly I warned myself that I was wasting vital time, that it was my duty to leave this lewd caressing of destiny and summon the Defenders.

And at last I burst free of Watchfulness and returned to the world I was guarding.

Avluela was beside me, dazed, terrified, her knuckles to her teeth, her eyes blank.

"Watcher! Watcher, do you hear me? What's happening? What's going to happen?"

"The invasion," I said. "How long was I under?"

"About half a minute. I don't know. Your eyes were closed. I thought you were dead."

"Gormon was speaking the truth! The *invasion* is almost here. Where is he? Where did he go?"

"He vanished as we came away from that place with the Mouth," Avluela whispered. "Watcher, I'm frightened. I feel everything collapsing. I have to fly — I can't stay down here now!"

"Wait," I said, clutching at her and missing her arm. "Don't go now. First I have to give the alarm, and then —"

But she was already stripping off her clothing. Bare to the waist, her pale body gleamed in the evening light, while about us people were rushing to and fro in ignorance of all that was about to occur. I wanted to keep Avluela beside me, but I could delay no longer in giving the alarm, and I turned away from her, back to my cart.

As though caught up in a dream born of overripe longings I reached for the node that I had never used, the one that would send forth a planetwide alert to the Defenders.

Had the alarm already been given? Had some other Watcher sensed what I had sensed and, less paralyzed by bewilderment

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and doubt, performed a Watcher's final task?

No. No. For then I would be hearing the sirens' shriek reverberating from the orbiting loudspeakers above the city.

I touched the node. From the corner of my eye I saw Avluela, free of her encumbrances now, kneeling to say her words, filling her tender wings with strength. In a moment she would be in the air, beyond my grasp.

With a single swift tug I activated the alarm.

In that instant I became aware of a burly figure striding toward us. Gormon, I thought; and as I rose from my equipment I reached out to him, wanting to seize him and hold him fast. But he who approached was not Gormon but some officious dough-faced Servitor who said to Avluela, "Go easy, Flier, let your wings drop. The Prince of Roum sends me to bring you to his presence."

He grappled with her. Her little breasts heaved; her eyes flashed anger at him.

"Let go of me! I'm going to fly!"

"The Prince of Roum summons you," the Servitor said, enclosing her in his heavy arms.

"The Prince of Roum will have other distractions tonight," I said. "He'll have no need of her."

As I spoke the sirens began to sing from the skies.

The Servitor released her. His mouth worked noiselessly for an instant; he made one of the protective gestures of the Will; he looked skyward and grunted, "The alarm! Who gave the alarm? You, old Watcher?"

Figures rushed about insanely in the streets.

Avluela, freed, sped past me — on foot, her wings but half-furled — and was swallowed up in the surging throng. Over the terrifying sound of the sirens came booming messages from the public annunciators, giving instructions for defense and safety. A lanky man with the mark of the guild of Defenders upon his cheek rushed up to me, shouted words too incoherent to be understood and sped on down the street. The world seemed to have gone mad.

Only I remained calm. I looked to the skies, half expecting to see the invaders' black ships already hovering above the towers of Roum. But I saw nothing except the hovering nightlights and the other objects one might expect overhead.

"Gormon?" I called. "Avluela?"

I was alone.

A strange emptiness swept over me. I had given the alarm. The invaders were on their way; I had lost my occupation. There was no need of Watchers now.

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Almost lovingly I touched the worn cart that had been my companion for so many years. I ran my fingers over its stained and pitted instruments; and then I looked away, abandoning it, and went down the dark streets cartless, burdenless, a man whose life had found and lost meaning in the same instant. And about me raged chaos.

X

It was understood that when the moment of Earth's final battle arrived, all guilds would be mobilized, the Watchers alone exempted. We who had manned the perimeter of defense for so long had no part in the strategy of combat; we were discharged by the giving of a true alarm. Now it was the time of the guild of Defenders to show its capabilities. They had planned for half a cycle what they would do in time of war. What plans would they call forth now? What deeds would they direct?

My only concern was to return to the royal hostelry and wait out the crisis. It was hopeless to think of finding Avluela, and I pummelled myself savagely for having let her slip away like that, naked and without a protector, in that confused moment. Where would she go? Who would shield her?

A fellow Watcher, pulling his cart madly along, nearly collided with me. "Careful!" I snapped.

He looked up, breathless, stunned. "Is it true?" he asked. "The alarm?"

"Can't you hear?"

"But is it real?"

I pointed to his cart. "You know how to find that out."

"They say the man who gave the alarm was drunk, an old fool who was turned away from the inn yesterday?"

"It could be so," I admitted.

"But if the alarm is real—!"

Smiling, I said, "If it is, now we all may rest. Good day to you, Watcher."

"Your cart! Where's your cart?" he shouted at me.

But I had moved past him, toward the mighty carven stone pillar of some relic of Imperial Roum.

Ancient images were carved on that pillar: battles and victories, foreign monarchs marched in the chains of disgrace through the streets of Roum, triumphant eagles celebrating imperial grandeur. In my strange new calmness I stood a while before the column of stone, admiring its elegant engravings. Toward me rushed a frenzied figure whom I recognized as the Rememberer Basil; I hailed him, saying, "How timely you come! Do me the kindness of explaining these images, Remem-

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berer. They fascinate me, and my curiosity is aroused."

"Are you insane? Can't you hear the alarm?"

"I gave the alarm, Remembererer."

"Flee, then! Invaders come! We must fight!"

"Not I, Basil. Now my time is over. Tell me of these images. These beaten kings, these broken emperors. Surely a man of your years will not be doing battle."

"All are mobilized now!"

"All but Watchers," I said. "Take a moment. Yearning for the past is born in me. Gormon has vanished; be my guide to these lost cycles."

The Rememberer shook his head wildly, circled around me, and tried to get away. I made a lunge at him, hoping to seize his skinny arm and pin him to the spot; but he eluded me and I caught only his dark shawl, which pulled free and came loose in my hands. Then he was gone, his spindly limbs pumping madly as he fled down the street and left my view.

I shrugged and examined the shawl I had so unexpectedly acquired. It was shot through with glimmering threads of metal, arranged in intricate patterns that teased the eye: it seemed to me that each strand disappeared into the weave of the fabric, only to reappear at some improbable point, like the lineage of dynasties unexpectedly revived in distant cities. The workmanship was superb. Idly I draped the shawl about my shoulders.

I walked on.

My legs, which had been on the verge of failing me earlier in the day, now served me well. In renewed youthfulness I made my way through the chaotic city, finding no difficulties about choosing my route. I headed for the river, then crossed it and, on the Tver's far side, sought the palace of the Prince. The night had deepened, for most lights were extinguished under the mobilization orders, and from time to time a dull boom signaled the explosion of a screening bomb overhead, liberating clouds of murk that shielded the city from most forms of long-range scrutiny. There were fewer pedestrians in the streets. The sirens still cried out. Atop the buildings the defensive installations were going into action; I heard the bleeping sounds of repellors warming up and saw long spidery arms of amplification booms swinging from tower to tower as they linked for maximum output. I had no doubt now that the invasion actually was coming. My own instruments might have been fouled by inner confusion, but they would not have proceeded thus

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far with the mobilization if the initial report had not been confirmed by the findings of hundreds of other members of my guild.

As I neared the palace a pair of breathless Rememberers sped toward me, their shawls flapping behind them. They called to me in words I did not comprehend — some code of their guild, I realized, recollecting that I wore Basil's shawl. I could not reply, and they rushed upon me, still gabbling; and switching to the language of ordinary men they said, "What is the matter with you? To your post! We must record! We must comment! We must observe!"

"You mistake me," I said mildly. "I keep this shawl only for your brother Basil, who left it in my care. I have no post to guard at this time."

"A Watcher," they cried in unison and cursed me separately and ran on. I laughed and went to the palace.

Its gates stood open. The neuters who had guarded the outer portal were gone, as were the two Indexers who had stood just within the door. The beggars that had thronged the vast plaza had jostled their way into the building itself to seek shelter; this had awakened the anger of the licensed hereditary mendicants whose customary stations were in that part of the building, and they had fallen upon the inflowing refugees with fury and unexpected strength. I saw cripples lashing out with their crutches held as clubs; I saw blind men landing blows with suspicious accuracy; meek penitents were wielding a variety of weapons ranging from stilettos to sonic pistols. Holding myself aloof from this shameless spectacle I penetrated to the inner recesses of the palace, peering into chapels where I saw Pilgrims beseeching the blessings of the Will and Communicants desperately seeking spiritual guidance as to the outcome of the coming conflict.

Abruptly I heard the blare of trumpets and cries of, "Make way! Make way!"

A file of sturdy Servitors marched into the palace, striding toward the Prince's chambers in the apse. Several of them held a struggling, kicking, frantic figure with half-unfolded wings: Avluela! I called out to her, but my voice died in the din, nor could I reach her. The Servitors shoved me aside. The procession vanished into the princely chambers. I caught a final glimpse of the little Flier, pale and small in the grip of her captors, and then she was gone once more.

I seized a bumbling neuter who had been moving uncertainly.

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"That Flier! Why was she brought here?"

"He — he — they —"

"Tell me!"

"The Prince — his woman — in his chariot — he — he — they — the invaders —"

I pushed the flabby creature aside and rushed toward the apse. A brazen wall ten times my own height confronted me. I pounded on it. "Avluela!" I shouted hoarsely. "Av . . . lu . . . ela . . .!"

I was neither thrust away nor admitted. I was ignored. The bedlam at the western doors of the palace had extended itself now to the nave and aisles, and as the ragged beggars boiled toward me I executed a quick turn and found myself passing through one of the side doors of the palace.

I stood in the courtyard that led to the royal hostelry, suspended and passive. A strange electricity crackled in the air. I assumed it was an emanation from one of Roum's defense installations, some kind of beam designed to screen the city from attack. But an instant later I realized that it presaged the actual arrival of the invaders.

Starships blazed in the heavens. When I had perceived them in my Watching they had appeared black against the infinite blackness, but now they burned with the radiance of suns. A stream of bright, hard, jewel-like globes bedecked the sky; they were ranged side by side, stretching from east to west in a continuous band, filling all the celestial arch, and as they erupted simultaneously into being it seemed to me that I heard the crash and throb of an invisible symphony heralding the arrival of the conquerors of Earth.

I do not know how far above me the starships were, nor how many of them hovered there, nor any of the details of their design. I know only that in sudden massive majesty they were there. If I had been a Defender my soul would have withered instantly at the sight.

Across the heavens shot light of many hues. The battle had been joined. I could not comprehend the actions of our warriors, and I was equally baffled by the maneuvers of those who had come to take possession of our history-crusted but time-diminished planet. To my shame I felt not only out of the struggle but above the struggle, as though this were no quarrel of mine. I wanted Avluela beside me, and she was somewhere within the depths of the palace of the Prince of Roum. Even Gormon would have been a comfort now, Gormon the Changeling, Gormon the spy, Gormon the monstrous betrayer of our world.

Gigantic amplified voices bel-

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lowed, "Make way for the Prince of Roum! The Prince of Roum leads the Defenders in the battle for the fatherworld!"

From the palace emerged a shining vehicle the shape of a teardrop, in whose bright-metalled roof a transparent sheet had been mounted so that all the populace could see and take heart in the presence of the ruler. At the controls of the vehicle sat the Prince of Roum, proudly erect, his cruel, youthful features fixed in harsh determination; and beside him, robed like an empress, I beheld the slight figure of the Flier Avluela. She seemed in a trance.

The royal chariot soared upward and was lost in the darkness.

It seemed to me that a second vehicle appeared and followed its path, and that the Prince's reappeared, and that the two flew in tight circles, apparently locked in combat. Clouds of blue sparks wrapped both chariots now; and then they swung high and far and were lost to me behind one of the hills of Roum.

Was the battle raging all over the planet, now? Was Perris in jeopardy, and holy Jorslem, and even the sleepy isles of the Lost Continents? Did starships hover everywhere? I did not know. I perceived events in only one small segment of the sky over Roum, and even there my awareness of what was taking place was dim, uncertain and ill-informed. There were momentary flashes of light in which I saw battalions of Fliers streaming across the sky; and then darkness returned as though a velvet shroud had been hurled over the city. In fitful bursts I saw the great machines of our defense speaking from the tops of our towers; and yet I saw the starships untouched, unharmed, unmoved above. The courtyard in which I stood was deserted, but in the distance I heard voices, full of fear and foreboding, shouting in tinny tones that might have been the screeching of birds. Occasionally there came a booming sound that rocked all the city.

Once a platoon of Somnambulists was driven past where I was. In the plaza fronting the palace I observed what appeared to be an array of Clowns unfolding some sort of sparkling netting of a military look. By one flash of lightning I was able to see a trio of Rememberers soaring aloft on a gravity plate, making copious notes of all that elapsed. It seemed — I was not sure — that the vehicle of the Prince of Roum returned, speeding across the sky with its pursuer clinging close. "Avluela," I whispered, as the

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twin dots of lights left my sight. Were the starships disgorging troops? Did colossal pylons of force spiral down from those orbiting brightnesses to touch the surface of the Earth? Why had the Prince seized Avluela? Where was Gormon? What were our Defenders doing? Why were the enemy ships not blasted from the sky?

Rooted to the ancient cobbles of the courtyard, I observed the cosmic battle in total lack of understanding throughout the long night.

Dawn came. Strands of pale light looped from tower to tower. I touched fingers to my eyes, realizing that I must have slept while standing. Perhaps I should apply for membership in the guild of Somnambulists, I told myself lightly. I put my hands to the Rememberer's shawl about my shoulders, wondering how I had managed to acquire it, and the answer came.

I looked toward the sky.

The alien starships were gone. I saw only the ordinary morning sky, gray with pinkness breaking through. I felt the jolt of compulsion and looked about for my cart, and reminded myself that I need do no more Watching, and I felt more empty than one would ordinarily feel at such an hour.

Was the battle over?

Had the enemy been conquered?

Were the ships of the invaders blasted from the sky and lying in charred ruin outside Roum?

All was silent. I heard no more celestial symphonies. Then, out of the eerie stillness there came a new sound, a rumbling noise as of wheeled vehicles passing through the streets of the city. And the invisible Musicians played one final note, deep and resonant, which trailed away jaggedly as though every string had been broken at once.

Over the speakers used for public announcements came quiet words:

"Roum is fallen. Roum is fallen."

XI

The royal hostelry was untended. Neuters and members of the servant guilds all had fled. Defenders, Masters and Dominators must have perished honorably in combat. Basil the Rememberer was nowhere about; likewise none of his brethren. I went to my room, cleansed and refreshed and fed myself, gathered my few possessions and bade farewell to the luxuries I had known so briefly. I regretted that I had had such a short time to visit Roum; but at least Gormon had been a most excellent guide, and I had seen a great deal.

Now I proposed to move on.

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It did not seem prudent to remain in a conquered city. My room's thinking cap did not respond to my queries, and so I did not know what the extent of the defeat was, here or in other regions, but it was evident to me that Roum at least had passed from human control, and I wished to depart quickly. I weighed the thought of going to Jorslem, as that tall pilgrim had suggested upon my entry into Roum. But then I reflected and chose a westward route, toward Perris, which not only was closer but held the headquarters of the Remembers.

My own occupation had been destroyed; but on this first morning of Earth's conquest I felt a sudden powerful and strange yearning to offer myself humbly to the Rememberers and seek with them knowledge of our more glittering yesterdays.

At midday I left the hostelry. I walked first to the palace, which still stood open. The beggars lay strewn about, some drugged, some sleeping, most dead; from the crude manner of their death I saw that they must have slain one another in their panic and frenzy. A despondent-looking Indexer squatted beside the three skulls of the interrogation fixture in the chapel. As I entered he said, "No use. The brains do not reply."

"How goes it with the Prince of Roum?"

"Dead. The invaders shot him from the sky."

"A young Flier rode beside him. What do you know of her?"

"Nothing. Dead, I suppose."

"And the city?"

"Fallen. Invaders are everywhere."

"Killing?"

"Not even looting," the Indexer said. "They are most gentle. They have *collected* us."

"In Roum alone, or everywhere?"

The man shrugged. He began to rock rhythmically back and forth. I let him be, and walked deeper into the palace. To my surprise, the imperial chambers of the Prince were unsealed. I went within, awed by the sumptuous luxury of the hangings, the draperies, the lights, the furnishings. I passed from room to room, coming at last to the royal bed, whose coverlet was the flesh of a colossal bivalve of the planet of another star, and as the shell yawned for me I touched the infinitely soft fabric under which the Prince of Roum had lain, and I recalled that Avluela too had lain here, and if I had been a younger man I would certainly have wept.

I left the palace and slowly crossed the plaza to begin my journey toward Perris.

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As I departed I had my first glimpse of our conquerors. A vehicle of alien design drew up at the plaza's rim, and perhaps a dozen figures emerged.

They might almost have been human. They were tall and broad, deep-chested, as Gormon had been, and only the extreme length of their arms marked them instantly as alien. Their skins were of strange texture, and if I had been closer I suspect I would have seen eyes and lips and nostrils that were not of a human design. Taking no notice of me, they crossed the plaza, walking in a curious loosejointed loping way that reminded me irresistibly of Gormon's stride, and entered the palace. They seemed neither swaggering nor belligerent.

Sightseers. Majestic Roum once more exerted its magnetism upon strangers.

Leaving our new masters to their amusement, I walked off, toward the outskirts of the city. The bleakness of eternal winter crept into my soul. I wondered: did I feel sorrow that Roum had fallen? Or did I mourn the loss of Avluela? Or was it only that I now missed three successive Watchings, and like an addict I was experiencing the pangs of withdrawal?

It was all of these that pained me, I decided. But mostly the last.

No one was abroad in the city as I made for the gates. Fear of the masters kept the Roumish in hiding, I supposed. From time to time one of the alien vehicles hummed past, but I was unmolested. I came to the city's western gate late in the afternoon. It was open, revealing to me a gently rising hill on whose breast rose trees with dark green crowns. I passed through, and saw a short distance beyond the gate the figure of a Pilgrim who was shuffling slowly away from the city.

His faltering, uncertain walk seemed strange to me, for not even his thick brown robes could hide the strength and youth of his body; he stood erect, his shoulders square and his back straight, and yet he walked with the hesitating, trembling step of an old man. When I drew abreast of him and peered under his hood I understood, for affixed to the bronze mask all Pilgrims wear was a reverberator, such as is used by blind men to warn them of obstacles and hazards. He became aware of me and said, "I am a sightless Pilgrim. I pray you do not molest me."

It was not a Pilgrim's voice. It was a strong and harsh and imperious voice.

I replied, "I molest no one. I am a Watcher who has lost his occupation this night past."

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"Many occupations were lost this night past, Watcher."

"Surely not a Pilgrim's."

"No," he said. "Not a Pilgrim's."

"Where are you bound?"

"Away from Roum."

"No particular destination?"

"No," the Pilgrim said. "None. I will wander."

"Perhaps we should wander together," I said, for it is accounted good luck to travel with a Pilgrim, and, shorn of my Flier and my Changeling, I would otherwise have traveled alone. "My destination is Perris. Will you come?"

"There as well as anywhere else," he said bitterly. "Yes. We will go to Perris together. But what business does a Watcher have there?"

"A Watcher has no business anywhere. I go to Perris to offer myself in service to the Remembrers."

"Ah."

"With Earth fallen, I wish to learn more of Earth in its pride."

"Is all Earth fallen, then, and not only Roum?"

"I think it is so," I said.

"Ah," replied the Pilgrim. "Ah!"

He fell silent, and we went onward. I gave him my arm, and now he shuffled no longer, but moved with a young man's brisk stride. From time to time he uttered what might have been a sigh or a smothered sob. When I asked him details of his Pilgrimage, he answered obliquely or not at all. When we were an hour's journey outside Roum, and already amid forests, he said suddenly, "This mask gives me pain. Will you help me adjust it?"

To my amazement he began to remove it. I gasped, for it is forbidden for a Pilgrim to reveal his face. Had he forgotten that I was not sightless too?

As the mask came away he said, "You will not welcome this sight."

The bronze grillwork slipped down from his forehead, and I saw first eyes that had been newly blinded, gaping holes where no surgeon's knife but possibly thrusting fingers had penetrated, and then the sharp regal nose, and finally the quirked, taut lips of the Prince of Roum.

"Your majesty!" I cried.

Trails of dried blood ran down his cheeks. About the raw sockets themselves were smears of ointment. He felt little pain, for he had killed it with those green smears, but the pain that burst through me was real and potent.

"Majesty no longer," he said. "Help me with the mask!" His hands trembled as he held it forth. "These flanges must be widened. They press cruelly at my cheeks. Here — here —"

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Quickly I made the adjustments, so that I would not have to see his face for long.

He replaced the mask.

In silence we continued. I had no way of making small talk with such a man. It would be a somber journey for us to Perris; but I was committed now to be his guide. I thought of Gormon and how well he had kept his vows. I thought too of Avluela, and a hundred times the words leaped to my tongue to ask the fallen Prince how his consort the Flier had fared in the night of defeat, and I did not ask.

Twilight gathered, but the sun still gleamed golden-red before us in the west. And suddenly I halted, and made a hoarse sound of surprise deep in my throat, as a shadow passed overhead.

High above me Avluela soared. Her skin was stained by the colors of the sunset, and her wings were spread to their fullest, radiant with every hue of the spectrum. She was already at least the height of a hundred men above the ground, and still climbing, and to her I must have been only a speck among the trees.

"What is it?" the Prince asked. "What do you see?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me what you see!"

I could not deceive him. "I see a Flier, your Majesty. A slim girl far aloft."

"Then the night must have come."

"No," I said. "The sun is still above the horizon."

"How can that be? She can have only nightwings. The sun would hurl her to the ground."

I hesitated. I could not bring myself to explain how it was that Avluela flew by day, though she had only nightwings. I could not tell the Prince of Roum that beside her, wingless, flew the invader Gormon, effortlessly moving through the air, his arm about her thin shoulders, steadying her, supporting her, helping her resist the pressure of the solar wind.

"Well?" he demanded. "How does she fly by day?"

"I do not know," I said. "It is a mystery to me. There are many things nowadays I can no longer understand."

The Prince appeared to accept that. "Yes, Watcher. Many things none of us can understand."

He fell once more into silence. I yearned to call out to Avluela, but I knew she could not and would not hear me, and so I walked on toward the sunset, toward Perris, leading the blinded Prince. And over us Avluela and Gormon sped onward, limned sharply against the day's last glow, until they climbed so high they were lost to my sight.

— ROBERT SILVERBERG

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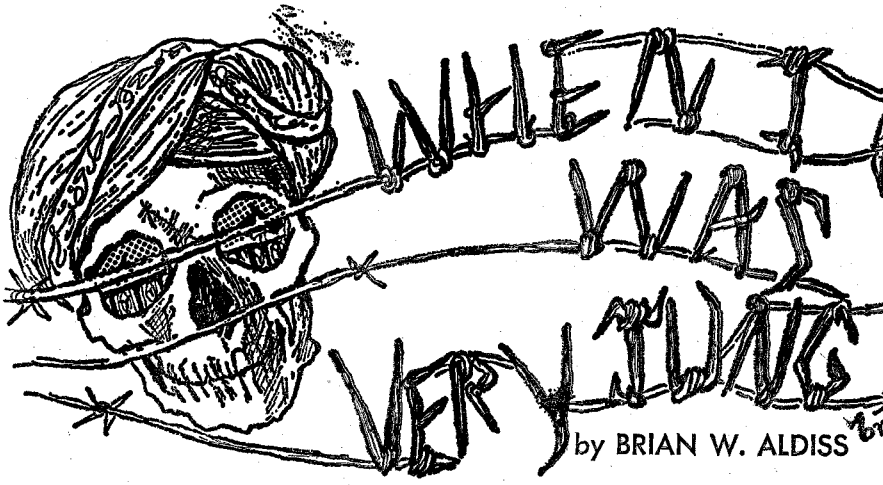

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

There are times when a man has to be careful about who shares his dreams.

"I dreamed I was Jung last night," said Saul Betatrom heavily over breakfast, showing his long lashes to his current mistress, as he poured cream over his jam puff.

"My, what fun!" Paidie exclaimed boredly. She wanted to go shopping in the bazaar, not sit or lie with Saul all the time; this Indian holiday was a real freak-out.

"Yeah, I was old Carl Jung, beard and all," said Saul, whipping up the mixture on his plate, and spooning it toward his ample lips. "Boy, there I was in some damned church or something in Switzerland, and this trapdoor opened at my feet—"

"Was I there?"

"No, you weren't there. I was alone, wearing this black robe, see, and I'd just formulated the concepts of psycho-analytic theory, and then this hole opened at my feet . . ."

Her interest ceased when she learned that she was excluded from the dream. Hazy memories of other lovers and sexual gymnasts floated into her mind; she couldn't recall a one of them that had ever dreamed of her. She looked over the balcony at the bone-white beach, the line of canted palms, and the ocean. Paidie told herself how much this was all costing Saul and tried to feel enjoyment.

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"... and there at the bottom of the lowest cellar were a couple of skulls, sort of mouldering and indistinct . . ." Saul was saying. He was head of the New York branch of Zadar Smith World; suddenly recollecting the fact, he piled on more cream and added sugar to the puff. The turbaned waiter appeared, silent at his elbow, and refilled his cup from a silver coffee pot.

"... although I'd climbed down so far, somehow I couldn't bend down to reach those skulls. Now wasn't that a funny thing?"

"Yeah, crazy. Say, are we going down to the bazaar today, Saul?"

Licking his spoon, he gave her a heavy stare. "They got riots in Kerala, you know that? The manager says it ain't safe outside the holiday strip."

"Oh, Saul, let's go see the bazaar! We can take a car."

"We'll see." Women never listened to you, he thought. They were okay, but they didn't listen. You could pay men to listen to you, but you couldn't pay women to listen to you. Might be an idea worth developing there... He switched on one of the rings on his finger and said into it, "You can pay men to listen to what you say but you can't pay women to listen to what you say." Must be a way of cashing in on a thought like that.

"I listen to what you say, Saulie," Paidie said.

They collected their gear, put on dark glasses and refrigerator hats and drifted through the foyer of the hotel. On the way, Saul tossed down a few dollars — this hotel had no nonsense with rupees — and picked up a wing of chicken from a spit to chew.

He was lean, with a flat stomach — a fine hunk of masculine body, she had to admit. "I don't know how you keep your figure, Saul. Why, you eat just about all the time and you hardly have any tummy at all to speak of. Me, I just diet and diet, yet look at the size of my thighs." She knew they were worth looking at.

Chewing, he slouched out into the sun and stood gazing across the immense spread of the Arabian Ocean. He meditated on whether to bother answering, slewing his eyes round as he did so, taking in the scene.

The great hotel sprang up out of the sand like a fortress, its array of bulging balconies forming gun-turrets that ceaselessly watched the sea. Colored umbrellas on the balconies, gay as death, waited to gun down the sun when it set.

The hotel was inviolate, an implacable holiday-annihilator. Round it clustered low shoddy buildings, the ramshackle bulk of

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an electric generator with auxiliary solar-power traps, the staff living-quarters, piles of old crates, a small sewage plant, old cars and old bicycles, a goat, an Indian charpoy with a man lying on it, rubbish in pompous containers and builders' materials.

"You want to get a Crosswell's Tape, honey. That's my secret."

"What's a Crosswell's Tape, for God's sake?"

He winced. Zadar Smith World had handled Crosswell's promotion for six-seven years now, and this fluff had never heard of their Tape.

"It's a worm. A laboratory-mutated version of a beef tapeworm. Thoroughly safe. Only needs replacing once every decade. Lodges in the small intestine, causes no discomfort. Enables you to eat up to fifty per cent more *and* keep your figure."

Behind the hotel was the twenty-foot-high wire barrier. It ran parallel to the sea for a long distance, as far as the eye could be bothered to see, in one direction; in the other, it angled off behind the hotel and ran down into the sea. Behind the wire barrier stood or sat solitary figures; or sometimes there was a little family group. Although there were possibly several hundreds of figures waiting behind the wire, they were motionless and well spaced, except round the gate, and so the effect was one of solitude, rather than overcrowding.

"Do you think one of those tapes would help my thighs?"

She got her camera ready to photograph the Indians behind the barrier. There was a cute little girl just standing there, not a stitch on, about four years old — you couldn't tell, really — with a cute little fat pot on her. Make a nice picture.

Their car slid up with a Sikh driver, luxuriant behind beard and green turban. Paidie took a photograph of him. The Sikh smiled and opened the car door for her. He was hairy, wow! Saul didn't have any hair at all, not anywhere on his body.

Saul caught and diagnosed her glance at the driver. "These guys have lousy org-ratings, honey, you know that? This guy has probably never done better than seven in his life."

In perfect English, the Sikh said, "Excuse me, sir, but there are famine riots in the bazaar every day this week. It may be dangerous to go there."

"The hotel must protect us. Are we supposed to stay behind that lousy chicken wire all week?"

"You are in front of it, sir. It is there for your protection."

"Well, you protect us in the bazaar. I take it you have a revolver, man?"

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"Yes sir. I have one here."

"You shoot well?"

"I am a very good shot, sir, or I do not get this job."

"Let's get going, then. Bazaar, and step on it!"

As the big black car slid through the gates, Saul tossed his gnawed chicken bone out of the window. The ragged crowd scrabbling in the dust for it reminded him of his dream.

"Wonder whose skulls they were? Guess it must have meant I was exploring the unconscious of mankind. You know, honey, I *am* a kind of genius. I invented the orgasm-rating system."

"What a rotten road they have here! Say, Saul, I'd hate to *live* in India, wouldn't you? They're so dirty and poor."

The poor and dirty were pressing close to the car, shouting or waving hands. The Sikh put his sandalled foot down and they bucked along the road.

"They're very under-developed, that's why. Yeah, the org-rating system was my big contribution to Advertising. Made my name, sold a thousand products. Then the psychoanalytical guys came along and discovered my concept had real bedrock psychological truth behind it! How you like that?"

"Saul, darling, do you really think it is safe here? Suppose your dream was a warning about venturing among primitive people or something?"

The car drew up under an avenue of tattered deodar trees, where dogs scuttled and people squatted. There were a few stalls here and shrill music playing. Saul continued his lecture.

". . . Since then research has proved that there are different levels of sexual enjoyment, just like different levels of sleep. Fert-Asia estimates that eighty-five per cent of the population in this area, male and female, never do any better than a grade seven orgasm. How'd you like that? And in India alone . . ."

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Boredom drove her out of the car. She stood under the trees, a chubby blonde in high-heeled sandals, wearing almost nothing. The scarecrows round about her had eyes of coal. They all ran to sell her anything they had, melons, brass statues, photos of little girls embracing goats, jewels, clay figurines, dried fish. Paidie fell into a panic.

"Saul, those dream skulls! Suppose they were ours, yours and mine!"

The crowd pressed closer. She hit out with her handbag. One of the beggars touched her. Then they fell on her. Paidie was screaming.

Saul was shaking the Sikh's shoulders. "Shoot, shoot, you lunatic! Or give me the gun!" He was vividly aware of the noise and the heat and the stink.

The Sikh started up the car, backed it swiftly away, turned, raced back for the hotel. "Better not to shoot, sir, or we all get very much trouble."

Saul sank back into his seat, chewing his lips. "Maybe you're right. The hotel can send out a rescue party. She wasn't in my dream. There was just me, dressed up as Jung . . . I hate dreaming about death or all that."

Inside the hotel, it was wonderfully cool and quiet. Saul ordered a martini to soothe his nerves.

— BRIAN W. ALDISS

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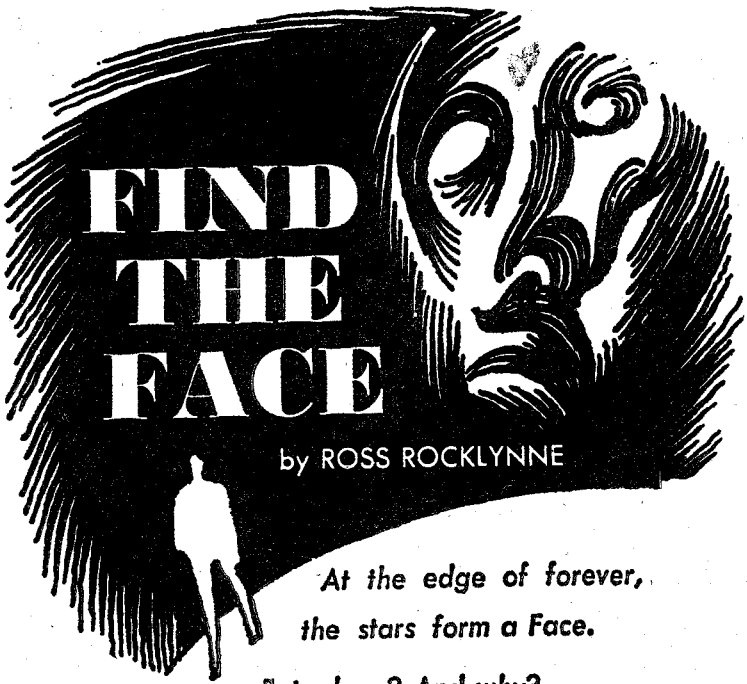

My name is R. Jennings, and I'm the man you're looking for. I'm captain, owner, and coffee programmer of a star-crackin' ship, the Astrid. On top of this, I'm a horse-breeder. Yes, I agree with you, sir: this is quite a spread of land. One hundred thousand acres of the finest on Cuspid, at the very edge of the galaxy, on the "mystic edge of forever," as someone before me called it.

Strange events occur out here amongst the Rim Worlds, sir, if you would care to believe me.

Ah, the drinks. Put them down there, my lad, the tall one for our visitor.

Yes, we may as well relax right here on the veranda, sir, and enjoy the sunsets. We'll have to wait a bit after the second dusk before my boys can cull out the distance runners and quarter horses you're interested in, but

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in the meantime let me entertain you with a story.

It's a strange story, I promise. No science. No sanity. Maybe a little bit of enlightenment — but what else could one expect from the "mystic edge of forever"? So sit back, sir, and have no qualms whatever about the horses. You'll buy them, for who could resist those green beauties? And you'll make a fortune racing them around the tracks of Earth.

In point of fact, my story starts with horses. Thirty-one years ago, I owned a stable myself. Ran some quarter horses at Ruidosa for the love of it and did well, but the real money and the real thrill was in my distance runners. And of all the thoroughbreds I ran, most of all I loved my three-year-old Green Lace. You know the old horseman's saying, "A lean horse for a long race"? Green Lace was lean, a faerie queen, and she *was* green. A breathtaking beauty to behold when she stretched out. And a winner. I lost her and my whole stable in a fire.

That's a sad beginning to my story, isn't it? Sadder still, who sired Green Lace? I would have started another stable with her line alone, if I could. But Green Lace's sire came from another planet, so the story went, from the far planet Cuspid.

But where the hell was Cuspid?

Nobody knew. No one cared.

Cuspid was not its official name.

I drifted into the Astro-Marine Service. Saved my money. Take a look at me thirty years later, at the age of seventy, as I was last year: goateed, trim gray hair clipped neatly, gray mustache, chest out — the works. A blue and gold space uniform as I pace the decks of my ship, the Astrid. I've got it made!

Except no Cuspid.

"Captain Jennings," said the woman who chartered my ship that day in Earth-June and Cygnus-January, "you may think it strange that a woman, alone except for an entourage of secretaries, and her own personal doctor, should take a ship out into the clouds of the galaxy. But I do have a purpose. A strange one. I do hope you can manage not to reveal your doubt of my sanity when you hear my story."

I am a gentleman, make no mistake about that. I bowed from the hips, with a gracious smile and a sweep of my white-gloved hand.

"Dear lady, I could not help but note the gentility of your bearing. What is sanity against beauty? Let us be insane together."

She seated herself.

"A proper answer," she smiled.

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"Your attitude intrigues me. Let us hope it will hold up under the forces that will be brought to bear against it.

"Come then, let us be insane together. What would you say if you saw a face in the sky? The galactic sky, as big as twice your sky here on Cygnus?"

"You saw such a face?"

"Yes, I did see such a face. In this sector of the galaxy, sir, close, I am told, to the Rim. Ten years ago I saw such a face. It was the face of my dead husband. Shall I go on?"

This woman's name was Ruth. She was Mrs. Ruth Coronado — the richest woman in this universe. She was sixty-seven years old, and she was my future wife. From the moment she stepped into my astro-marine office, our relationship was assured, the cement was set. She didn't know it at the time; I did. For there was no difficulty meeting her glance for glance, of looking deeply through her eyes into the unmeasured core of her. I adored Mrs. Ruth Coronado, simply, and forever.

Like countless women before her, she had enjoyed the luxuries of her husband's wealth without incurring any of the hazards. John Coronado, tycoon extraordinary, owner of countless worlds, industrialist, exporter and importer the length and breadth of the Galaxy, died one day of a heart attack.

"I was with him the day he died," she told me, smiling with her head up, her voice lilting, mellow. "It was, Captain Jennings, a bad moment for me. We had been married twenty years.

"You see, while his disease was not unusual among men of his forcefulness and energy, it seemed cruel that he should die at a time when for the first time in many years he was not actively conducting his business affairs. For many months, he had left his industrial and financial empire in the hands of trusted subordinates. He himself, with me, was on a search."

"A search," I said, half-question, half-statement; for had I myself not been on a search, a search that, indeed, had begun just thirty years ago, just about the time that John Coronado was courting Ruth?

Memory, however, was taking me back ten years, to the wreck of a star flyer.

"He was on a search for the remains of a ship and the bodies that might be inside?" I asked. "And it was in this sector of the galaxy, in Cygnus the Swan?"

"In Cygnus the Swan, yes," she said coolly. "Somewhere along its axis, close to the Rim. You are telling me you know something of this event?"

"The wreck of the Star Maid,"

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I said. "Some flotsam was found. No bodies. Members of your husband's family. His mother, his sister, her husband and two children."

"Exactly. And his brother, and of course the crew. As a space-faring man perhaps you would remember such an event."

She passed her hand lightly across her forehead, as if to remove an errant strand of rich grayed hair. Actually, she was attempting to hide a weariness that showed in the pale shadowed blue of her eyes, in the sudden droop of her shoulders. She sighed deeply, but without sound. Then her head came up again, and the permanent smile of Ruth played again about her lips.

"Forgive me," she said. "I am tired. It is obvious to you, of course, that I have searched too long. Nonetheless, I shall go on."

She now produced a photograph from a briefcase. It was one of the hard-to-produce cubagraphs. Looked at straight on, the face was a seven-eighths profile. Looked at from any other angle, one saw it as though it were a living face.

"This was the face I saw from the observation strip of the spaceship we were flying," she said simply. "My husband had just died, as I knew he would. The moment was one of terrible sadness for me. I wandered away from the death-bed as in a dream, and as in a dream, I found myself amidship, bodiless, almost, and saw my husband's face carved into the clouds of stars.

"The face was as you see it in this cubagraph. My heart stopped when first I saw it. But then, in my sadness, I simply assumed that this was the way things were — the way they should be. John, who owned so much of the galaxy, who, indeed, loved all of Creation as few men ever have revered anything, now belonged to God. God had buried his soul out here, on the mystic edge of forever.

"As I watched entranced, hypnotized if you will, the ship was moving on, and my husband's face naturally disappeared as the angle of my vision slowly changed.

"Then I came to.

"I knew I had seen no such face."

She smiled sadly. "That is, I knew it then. Later, I saw the truth. The Face actually had been there. That was when my search started."

"And the object of your search?" I asked.

"To find the Face," she said. "Then to find a world under it where I could live out my remaining years.

"It was my way of being with my husband for Eternity."

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At seventy, I was and am wise enough not to inject common sense where none is asked for. Hola! Did we not both know that no such Face existed? Therefore we went about the task of sealing our bargain.

On the next morning of that cold Cygnus-January, I went through the micro-files of the Farer's Astrogation Library. In the past ten years, a Mrs. Ruth Coronado chartered three space-boats, which crept up and down the axis of Cygnus the Swan, a matter of some forty million light-years. The files also gave me the present address of a commanding officer. I called on him.

"She's skeeting you, Jennings," this man told me. "It's her way of getting her kicks out of life. Look up her record. She was on the stage before she married John Coronado. Now she's back on stage again, and a fine-looking women she always will be with that everlastin' smile. Which is all right, but don't let her package you.

"In any case, we spent a year on the job. I was happy to take her money. That's it."

Money, who needs it? But I needed Ruth, as I came to call her very shortly. Two Cygnus-mornings later my ship, the elegant, the incomparable, the beauteous Astrid, lifted from her berth, borne on her fire-wings. Our speed instantly was beyond that of light. My crew of five wove a twining dance of faultless precision as they tended their ship. We clove space and swooped into our rendezvous with the far end of the Swan's axis, we speared the powdery clouds of mystic space inspiring beyond compare.

In my spacious mirrored and vented control room I showed Mrs. Ruth Coronado how we would operate. I personally programmed the ship's macrosticklers: John Coronado's face was fed into them by bits, his face becoming the guiding soul of this ship.

"What the ship sees from moment to moment will be fed into the macrosticklers as well; should the ship see what you hope to find, you'll know it: the alarm bells will shake you out of sleep."

This woman who was to be my wife, and knew it not, smiled her gentle smile.

"You are brave and kind to share my insanity, Captain," she said. "Why is it that you do so?"

"Perhaps because I am on a search myself," I answered, with a shrug that waved my fine gold epaulettes. I told her about my lost planet Cuspid and its wild green horses. "That has been my search," I said. I looked down into her face, the smooth face of an older woman who has spent many years in space. Her eyes

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were lost in their pale blue shadowy hollows. I said, "But we all must have a search, must we not? It gives us our reason for 'walking across the street.' "

She touched my hand lightly to show she heard, but she was thinking deeply. Finally, she came back, letting the indentations at the corners of her lips again receive her smile.

"Perhaps I too have heard of the horse planet," she said. "Was it not in the early days of the Panic when nobody thought Earth would survive, that animals of every description were shipped across the galaxy and dumped on any world that might sustain them?"

I nodded. "Few of those breeds survived. The horses of Cuspid adapted." The old pain returned to me, and she must have seen it in my face, for the memory of the death by fire of my incomparable Green Lace was still with me. She clasped my hand and held onto it as we left the control room.

"My strange Captain Jennings," she murmured. "You search for horses in the sky, and I search for a Great Star Face. Perhaps on the Rim anything can happen."

"Anything!" I told her, falling in with her mood. "Why, Ruth, out here creation is still at work. Perhaps you cannot really comprehend how close we are to the edge of the galaxy at this moment. Mysterious forces that we do not understand are shaping the lives of stars! Hydrogen clouds blow willy-nilly at speeds well-nigh impossible, and what are the forces that blow them? We do not know."

She smiled indulgently. "I comprehend little of space, though you could by this time call me a star-woman."

"Did you know," I pursued, "that more than once a *beast* with clawed legs of fire has been seen in these skies, moving like a comet would move across Earth's spaces?"

"This is a true story?"

"A true story," I proclaimed. "And there are other strangenesses out here. What did you once call it? The mystic edge of forever? Exactly! Now think about this, dear lady." And there I let the subject lapse, albeit with enough of a glint in my eye to leave her in more than a little doubt as to the authenticity of my tale.

But it was authentic. I myself had seen such a beast!

You do not believe me? Hukkah! Very well. Let us stay with the reality of green horses forty million light-years from Earth, and I shall get on with my tale at once.

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The Cygnus-days passed. They were wonderful days. My love and I dined by candle-light. We walked the spacious decks, the planking awash with the fantastic flickering rainbows brought into being by our faster-than-light plunge through the Swan. Suns puffed toward us like explosions. And once we saw the Beast!

"There he goes!" I cried, and she pressed to me endeavoring to sight along my pointed finger, and when I got over my excitement she was looking up at me in wonder, white starlight turned to blue in her eyes.

"You really believe there was a Beast," she said.

"Yes, yes!" I cried, still searching the changing skies. "It was there! I saw it!"

"You easily fool yourself, my strange captain. You fool yourself, for me, into believing there is a Face. You fool yourself into seeing a Beast."

At this I was ruffled.

Ruth did not know the tradition.

When you say you see the Beast, no one differs. You must say, "Tell me about the Beast? Is it like the one I saw? Did it have seven legs or four?" And then you describe it, and everyone whispers excitedly, and a few others of those listening offer corroberating stories.

After all! One is traveling so fast!

Indeed, fast is not even a word that suffices, it is an Earth-word for Earth-spaces, suitable only for describing the bicycle race down the block. Could the word fast describe our speeds as the Astrid gobbled dimensions and ruptured Space? What might one not see in such conditions? Surely — at the least — a Beast!

Mrs. Ruth Coronado in the rainbow light was troubled.

"I did not mean to offend you, my dear captain," she said. "Perhaps there is a Beast — too."

We stopped in the observation strip, and there we were part of the massive sky.

I faced her, took her hand, stood looking down at it, at the tracery of blue veins under the translucent skin. It was the hand of an older woman who had lived graciously.

I said, "Perhaps you know how I feel about you, Ruth."

"Yes," she said. "Perhaps we are too old for this, however."

"No," I said. "We are young. You and I have lived as star-people for enough years for it to count. Why else our vitality? For we are vital, Ruth. And you are vital to me, necessary to my life. I want to marry you."

A shadow darkened under her eyes. Her hand squeezed mine convulsively, not in some answer-

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ing emotion, but in pain. "Captain," she whispered against my jacket. "You must remember. We are looking for my husband's galactic face!"

I was seventy! My love was not of great heat, let us admit, but oh! the flame was steady. The weeks of our search passed. We were enclosed in curling waves of star clouds, we were whipped and hastened on in our fantasy of speed by great writhing rubbery sheets of white flame. Ruth and I talked endlessly. We knew each other's lives. We walked arm in arm, hand in hand, fingers intertwined, along the lush decks of my princess ship the Astrid. Once we landed on a world I did not know, but the people, of direct Earth descent, were kindly.

Here Mrs. Ruth Coronado, with a touch of apology on my arm, told me she would need a day to take care of some business affairs.

She must send some messages to Earth along the Leaper, and she must wait for replies.

She would not tell me what these messages were.

She entered the Farer's Communication Building, which was sponsored by Galactic Control, just as it sponsored other communication centers on thousands of other worlds.

The money she would spend to ride a single message down the photon-roads and to receive a reply via the same Leaper system was nothing to her, but it would be a considerable amount, even though the system was subsidized.

At the end of the day, one of her secretaries who stayed with her called me aboard the Astrid, informing me that Mrs. Ruth Coronado would be waiting.

She emerged from the offices of the communication center with a preoccupied frown.

"I will need another day," she told me.

I held my peace, for could I, even lightly, suggest that she hold no secrets from me, when I myself was guilty of a certain duplicity?

You will understand the depth of my entanglement in this fantasy we both lived when I explain to you that I began to wait for the Astrid to find the Face! — that I began to wait for the alarm bells to ring!

And the waiting was loathesome. A cubagraph of John Coronado, you see, somehow had become the soul of my ship. John Coronado had taken from me the captaincy of my ship. John Coronado *was* my ship, I a helpless pawn of his galactic whim.

More! In my mind, try though I would to erase it, John Coronado became my rival. I ground

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my teeth at the mere thought of my ship the Astrid, my bloodhound of space, tracking down that improbable, sneering, challenging, hateful Face — only to have my love lost to me.

Therefore, I shut off the alarm system.

There would be no bells to tell Mrs. Ruth Coronado that her impossible search was over.

Instead, I tuned the alarm system to a small receiver snapped to my wrist.

Nervously, I, fool that I was, waited for it to ring.

At the end of Ruth's second mysterious day at the Farer's Communication Building, I met her, and she was smiling a secret smile. Her face, lined though it might be, was the radiant face of an inwardly beautiful woman.

She took my hands in hers. Her shadowed blue eyes were full of a suppressed excitement.

"Captain Jennings," she said, "*your* search, at least, is over. I have the coordinates of the planet Cuspid!"

I studied the space-graph the communications people had made for her.

Cuspid's true name was Terrano IV. It twined about the two units of a double-star system in an endless progression of figure eights — or, if you wish to sustain yourself in the magic of the Rim, you may think of it as performing an endless series of infinity signs.

I looked up from the graph. "Thank you," I said. My eyes asked the question.

She said, "Cuspid is a code name. There were many such habitable planets given code names during the Panic, for fear that the warriors of Earth would destroy them also. Somewhere in my husband's extensive business files the tidbit of information was waiting. Many messages were necessary, to many worlds. Finally, the answer came.

"Now your search ends."

"Yes," I said, once more studying the chart which would lead me to the planet of my dreams. At the terminus of Cygnus the Swan it was, not far. I laid the paper aside. Impulsively I took Ruth's hand in a gesture she was accustomed to.

"Ruth," I said, pleading. "Do not refuse me now. This is the sign you and I have been waiting for. Go there with me. To Terrano IV. Marry me, Ruth. Will you?"

She drew back, looking at me through a film of tears, blindly shaking her head. "Your search is over," she whispered, "but what about *my* search? Find the Face for me, Captain Jennings, find the Face!"

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I could say nothing. I had no defense. Ruth turned away with head bowed so that a curl of silver gray hair fell across her eyes, and she returned alone to her cabin.

Find the face.

I found it. I found a face.

The situation was the same as when Ruth saw the Face. She was alone, she was deeply troubled, she was haunted by the powdery gleam of all Creation charming her from the open void. I saw a galactic face, as she did, two Cygnus-mornings after she gave me the gift of her love, the location of the planet Cuspid.

This face was spread across that whole sky along whose star-clouded shores my elegant boat swam. It subtended an arc of 130°, and that was a lot of sky. I stared stupidly, expecting the face's drooping, star-gleaming lips to curl in contempt, his coal-sack nostrils to pinch in displeasure, his God-eyes, with groups of burning-bright stars where the irises were, to fume at me in cosmic anger that I should dare to touch his Ruth. But no, his expression, somber, frowning, distant, remained the same. How handsome a man, he that looked not down upon me but through me, and, indeed, seemed to have no interest in me. The hair, gray-black, was swept in a haughty wave of radiant gases over his forehead, which in turn was so neatly limned and shaped by clouds and strings of primal hydrogen matter. Hair untidily covered the tops of his ears, which in turn were but stellar helices with darks and brights so deftly brushed in by an Artist whose identity I could not conceive. How deep and dark the empty spaces under his starry cheekbones.

My head swam. "No!" I whispered brokenly. "No!" I turned away, buried my head in my hands. I thought to myself, "How can I? How can I marry Ruth? I cannot."

When I again faced the observation strip, the face was gone. The changing angle of vision totally disrupted that giant physiognomy; the ship would have to return to an exact position in space. At this, I wheeled and with a half-stumbling run made for the computer deck. I burst in. The attendant was standing over the macrosticklers, his jaw slack. When he turned toward me his lips worked soundlessly, and he started to speak.

I cut him off.

"The read-out sheet," I said, holding out a hand that was shaking badly.

The attendant faltered, "There — there is no read-out sheet, sir. The macrosticklers have not been scanning."

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I was speechless, trying to rant, to swear; but cold and heartless within me was my true self, triumphant, scheming. The macros had not been scanning. Well and good. The Face was already dozens of light-years behind us, and the coordinates again were lost. The Face was gone, and I would marry Ruth.

There would be no John Coronado in ponderous threat above us, there would be no John Coronado glaring down at us while we lived our life of love on Terrano IV.

Dear God, leave John Coronado in a distant sky, back there where he was, dead, not living, sanctified in his galactic grave, eternalized out of who knew what mysterious cosmic pulse.

"You fool," I began thickly. "I programmed —"

He blurted, "Mrs. Coronado did it, sir. Not more than ten minutes ago. She asked me to remove the Coronado tapes. I refused. I suggested she speak to you, sir. She informed me this was her responsibility, hers only. She offered me a bribe, more than my yearly salary, sir. I refused."

"And then what?"

He gestured. The John Coronado tapes had not been removed, but, rather, incinerated.

"She had a beamer in her purse, sir."

I stumbled from the computer deck, dazed. Oh, do not consider me guiltless. I could have noted the time I saw the face. I could have pressed a stud in my watch which would have imprinted time, and exact position, on the Master Log. Such has been my unbroken habit when any noteworthy event occurs. Compute if you will the inner tensions which kept me from that simple, well-nigh unconscious act.

Compute also, if you will, why I did not check the wrist alarm I wore. Had it rung, and if not why not?

I went to Ruth's cabin, knocked, entered quietly when her low voice answered. She gazed at me sadly, shadows under her eyes, her fingers nervously waving into each other.

"Captain Jennings," she sighed, troubledly gazing at the deck. "You seem very excited. Perhaps because I destroyed the John Coronado tapes?"

"Yes, Ruth. Why did you?"

"Because I am tired. Because the strain is too much. The waiting, Captain Jennings. The suspense. The waking up in the middle of sleep, waiting for the alarm bells to ring, to tell us my dead darling has been found and that his beloved face is out there for me to see.

"I am tired. There will be no more searching."

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Then she came to me, stood very close and slipped her arms over my shoulders, and laid her head on my chest.

"We are two old people, Captain Jennings. But I do love you, for your kindness, for your quick nature, for your love of me, and because you are straight of back, a handsome man of whom any woman, young or old, would be proud. So marry me, Captain Jennings. Take me to your planet Cuspid, and let us live out our lives together.

"I give up the search. Perhaps because I have been searching only for love after all. It is all we search for; John will understand.

Mrs. Ruth Coronado and Captain R. Jennings of the good ship Astrid were married the next planet-fall. We had a honeymoon that lasted three weeks as we dove across those far magic skies on the edge of our galaxy where anything can happen. And we came to the planet Cuspid, whose true name was Terrano IV.

Oh lovely world! My love twined about it like arms from my soul. For it was green. Its green continents floated on green foamy seas, its skies were shades of green in the light of two hot green suns — and on the smaller continent my green horses thrived!

There were people here. Land was waiting to be claimed, and finally we stood in the midst of our hundred thousand acres, contemplating the house we would build, the stables, the corrals; we saw men riding the herds, we saw buyers coming from all the worlds.

That night we camped. My love and I alone put up a tent, and we were asleep long before this fast turning world spun its night face to the myriad stars shining through its misty green atmosphere. But I, I could not stay asleep. Mysteriously compelled to rise, my soul filled with the wonder of this life that had given me everything I would have wished for in my wildest dreams, I walked the night, breathing the red-flower scent, listening to the call of the wood-birds, making friends with curious insects who sat on my arms chirruping and presumably trying to talk. And then I stood looking into the sky and saw the face of John Coronado.

It was the true face of John Coronado.

That other face, that I saw from space, had not been.

Whose, then? I knew.

A triumph of elation overcame me when I saw the Face. And there was relief, a blind, remorseless relief, as if I had escaped a gallows. Indeed, all these weeks I was strangling in a muck of guilt.

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And now there was the Face.

I went back to the tent, brushed lightly at my beloved's hair. She awoke.

"Come," I said. I led her from the tent, faced her so that if she raised her eyes she would see John Coronado.

"There were other members of your husband's family who died in the wreck of the Star Maid," I said. "A brother?"

She said in wonder, "A brother. Yes. Of course. A younger brother. But why do you ask?"

"And they looked much alike?"

"Yes . . . perhaps so."

I tilted up her head so that she was looking full into the Face.

"It is the Face," I said. I saw her eyes dilate and shine. I felt her hand in mine stiffen. I felt the shuddering of her shoulder pressed against mine. Her hand flew to her lips as if to stifle some cry. She darted me what I can only describe as a frightened glance. "Oh!" she gasped. "It is so very strange that you should find him here. Perhaps some night even the Beast shall fly through our skies."

Then with a motion quite deliberate, she turned her back on the Face, and smiled the firm smile of Ruth. She slipped her arm through mine, and with her other hand caressed my own face lightly but lingeringly.

"*You* are my husband," she said. "Be sure of that. Therefore it is time to return to our tent.

"The night will come when my dead husband will — go away."

You laugh? You do not believe? Ah, but remember the tradition, sir! A gentleman of space does not doubt! But still you laugh? Come then, let us select the miracle horses you wish to buy. But first — turn! Look! John Coronado, the dead husband of the woman I love, is rising swiftly in the sky! You see now the wild hydrogen clouds of his hair! Come the starry spirals of his giant ears, the star-gleaming forehead, the great blazing fumes of the blue-burning stars that are his eyes, and now the long nose painted with a billion suns and pieces of black emptiness! Then the lips, sir, you see them — squint your eyes a bit now — the lips, made of the hind end of a ring nebula. How gently they curve, how sweetly they seem to be murmuring but one name! There, sir, is the Face. How piercingly he looks down upon my acres on my planet Cuspid, and how tenderly he searches out my wife, my Ruth!

Forgive me, sir.

Ruth and I are just now learning how to walk out together at night. — ROSS ROCKLYNNE

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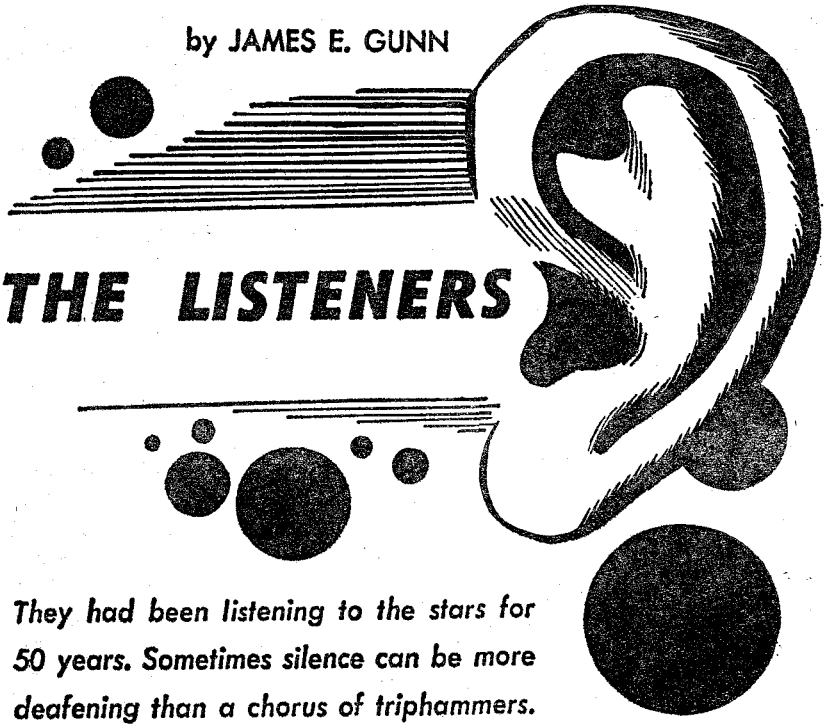
by JAMES E. GUNN



THE LISTENERS

They had been listening to the stars for 50 years. Sometimes silence can be more deafening than a chorus of triphammers.

I

"Is there anybody there?" said the Traveler, Knocking on the moonlit door . . . .

The voices babbled.

MacDonald heard them and knew that there was meaning in them, that they were trying to communicate and that he could understand them and respond to them if he could only concentrate on what they were saying, but he couldn't bring himself to make the effort. He tried again, harder.

"Back behind everything, lurking like a silent shadow behind the closed door, is the question we can never answer except positively: is there anybody there?"

That was Bob Adams, eternally the devil's advocate, looking querulously at the others around the conference table. His round face was sweating although the mahogany-paneled room was cool.

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Saunders puffed hard on his pipe. "But that's true of all science. The image of the scientist eliminating all negative possibilities is ridiculous. Can't be done. So he goes ahead on faith and statistical probability."

MacDonald watched the smoke rise above Saunders' head in clouds and wisps until it wavered in the draft from the air duct, thinned out, disappeared. But only to one sense. Although he could not see it, the odor reached his nostrils. It was an aromatic blend easily distinguishable from the flatter smell of cigarettes being smoked by Adams and some of the others.

Wasn't this their task? MacDonald wondered. To detect the thin smoke of life that drifts through the universe, to separate one trace from another, molecule by molecule, and then force them to reverse their entropic paths into their ordered and meaningful original form.

All the king's horses, and all the king's men . . . .

And yet life itself is impossible, he thought; but men exist by reversing entropy.

Down the long table cluttered with overflowing ash trays and coffee cups and doodled scratch pads Olsen said, "We always knew it would be a long search. Not years but centuries. The computers must have sufficient data, and that means bits of information approximating the number of molecules in the universe. Let's not chicken out now."

"If seven maids with seven
mops
Swept it for half a year,
Do you suppose," the Walrus
said,
"That they could get it
clear?"

". . . ridiculous," someone was saying, and then Adams broke in, "It's easy for you to talk about centuries when you've been here only three years. Wait until you've been at it for ten years, like I have. Or Mac here, who has been on the Project for twenty years and head of it for fifteen."

"What's the use of arguing about something we can't know anything about?" Sonnenborn asked him. "We have to base our our position on probabilities. Shklovskii and Sagan estimated that there are more than 1,000 million habitable planets in our galaxy alone. Van Hoerner estimated that one in three million have advanced societies in orbit around them; Sagan said one in one hundred thousand. Either way, it's good odds that there's somebody there — three hundred or ten thousand in our segment of the

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universe. Our job is to listen in the right place or in the right way or understand what we hear."

Adams turned to MacDonald. "What do you say, Mac?"

"I say these basic discussions are good for us," MacDonald said mildly, "and we need to keep reminding ourselves what it is we're doing, or we'll get swallowed in a quicksand of data. I also say that it's time now to get down to the business at hand — what observations do we make tonight and the rest of the week before our next staff meeting?"

Saunders began, "I think we should make a methodical sweep of the entire galactic lens, listening on all wave lengths —"

"We've done that a hundred times," said Sonnenborn.

"Not with my new filter —"

"Tau Ceti still is the most likely," said Olsen. "Let's really give it a hearing —"

MacDonald heard Adams grumbling, half to himself, "If there is anybody, and they are trying to communicate, some amateur is going to pick it up on his ham set, decipher it on his James Bond coderule, and leave us sitting here on one hundred million dollars of equipment with egg all over our faces."

"And don't forget," MacDonald said, "tomorrow is Saturday night, and Maria and I will be expecting you all at our place at eight for the customary beer and bull. Those who have more to say can save it for then."

It was a joviality MacDonald did not feel. He did not know whether he could stand another Saturday night session of drink and discussion and dissension about the Project. It was one of his low periods when everything seemed to pile up on top of him, and he could not get out from under, or tell anybody how he felt. No matter how he felt, the Saturday nights were good for morale.

Pues no es possible que este continuo el arco armado ni la condicion y flaqueza humana se pueda sustentar sin alguna licita recreacion.[1]

Within the Project, morale was always a problem. Besides, it was good for Maria. She did not get out enough. She needed to see people. And then . . . .

And then maybe Adams was right. Maybe nobody was there. Maybe nobody was sending signals because there was nobody to send signals. Maybe man was all alone in the universe. Alone with God. Or alone with himself, whichever was worse.

Maybe all the money was being

1 The bow cannot always stand bent, nor can human frailty subsist without some lawful recreation.
— Cervantes, **Don Quixote.**

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wasted, and the effort, and the preparation — all the intelligence and education and ideas being drained away into an endlessly empty cavern.

Habe nun, ach! Philosophie,
Juristerei und Medizin,
Und leider auch Theologie
Durchaus studiert, mit heissem Bemuhn.
Da steh'ich nun, ich armer Tor!
Und bin so klug als wie zuvor;
Heisse Magister, heisse Doktor gar,
Und ziehe schon an die zehen Jahr
Herauf, herab und quer und krumm
Meine Schuler an der Nase herum —
Und sehe, dass wir nichts wissen konnen![2]

Poor fool. Why me? MacDonald thought. Could not some other lead them better, not by the nose but by his real wisdom? Perhaps all he was good for was the Saturday night parties. Perhaps it was time for a change.

He shook himself. It was the endless waiting that wore him down, the waiting for something that did not happen, and the Congressional hearings were coming up again. What could he say that he had not said before? How could he justify a project that already had gone on for nearly fifty years without results and might go on for centuries more?

"Gentlemen," he said briskly, "to our listening posts."

By the time he had settled himself at his disordered desk, Lily was standing beside him.

"Here's last night's computer analysis," she said, putting down in front of him a thin folder. "Reynolds says there's nothing there, but you always want to see it anyway. Here's the transcription of last year's Congressional hearings." A thick binder went on top of the folder. "The correspondence and the actual appropriation measure are in another file if you want them."

MacDonald shook his head.

"There's a form letter here from NASA establishing the ground rules for this year's budget and a personal letter from Ted Wartinian saying that conditions are really tight and some cuts look inevitable. In fact, he says there's a possibility the Project might be scrubbed."

Lily glanced at him. "Not a chance," MacDonald said confidently.

2 Now I have studied philosophy,
Medicine and the law,
and unfortunately, theology,
wearily sweating, yet I stand now,
poor fool, no wiser than I was before;
I am called Master, even Doctor,
and for these last ten years have drawn
my students, by the notes, up, down,
crosswise and crooked. Now I see
that we can know nothing finally.
— Goethe, **Faust.**

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"There's a few applications for employment. Not as many as we used to get. The letters from school children I answered myself. And there's the usual nut letters from people who've been receiving messages from outer space and from one who's had a ride in a UFO. That's what he called it — not a saucer or anything. A feature writer wants to interview you and some others for an article on the Project. I think he's with us. And another one who sounds as if he wants to do an expose."

MacDonald listened patiently. Lily was a wonder. She could handle everything in the office as well as he could. In fact, things might run smoother if he were not around to take up her time.

"They've both sent some questions for you to answer. And Joe wants to talk to you."

"Joe?"

"One of the janitors."

"What does he want?" They couldn't afford to lose a janitor. Good janitors were harder to find than astronomers, harder even than electronicians.

"He says he has to talk to you, but I've heard from some of the lunch room staff that he's been complaining about getting messages on his — on his —"

"Yes?"

"On his false teeth."

MacDonald sighed. "Pacify him somehow, will you, Lily. If I talk to him we might lost a janitor."

"I'll do my best. And Mrs. MacDonald called. Said it wasn't important and you needn't call back."

"Call her," MacDonald said. "And, Lily — you're coming to the party tomorrow night, aren't you?"

"What would I be doing at a party with all the brains?"

"We want you to come. Maria asked me particularly. It isn't all shop talk, you know. And there are never enough women. You might strike it off with one of the young bachelors."

"At my age, Mr. MacDonald? You're just trying to get rid of me."

"Never."

"I'll get Mrs. MacDonald." Lily turned at the door. "I'll think about the party."

MacDonald shuffled through the papers. Down at the bottom was the only one he was interested in — the computer analysis of last night's listening. But he kept it there, on the bottom, as a reward for going through the others. Ted was worried, really worried. *Move over, Ted.* And then the writers. He supposed he would have to work them in somehow. At least it was part of the fall-out to locating the Pro-

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ject in Puerto Rico. Nobody just dropped in. And the questions. Two of them caught his attention.

How did you come to be named Project Director? That was the friendly one. *What are your qualifications to be Director?* That was the other. How would he answer them? Could he answer them.

Finally he reached the computer analysis, and it was just like those for the rest of the week, and the week before that, and the months and the years before that. No significant correlations. Noise. There were a few peaks of reception — at the 21 centimeter line, for instance — but these were merely concentrated noise. Radiating clouds of hydrogen, as the Little Ear functioned like an ordinary radio telescope.

At least the Project showed some results. It was feeding star survey data tapes into the international pool. Fall-out. Of a process that had no other product except negatives.

Maybe the equipment wasn't sensitive enough. Maybe. They could beef it up some more. At least it might be a successful ploy with the Committee, some progress to present, if only in the hardware. You don't stand still. You spend more money or they cut you back — or off.

Note: Saunders — plans to increase sensitivity.

Maybe the equipment wasn't discriminating enough. But they had used up a generation of ingenuity canceling out background noise, and in its occasional checks the Big Ear indicated that they were doing adequately on terrestrial noise, at least.

Note: Adams — new discrimination gimmick.

Maybe the computer wasn't recognizing a signal when it had one fed into it. Perhaps it wasn't sophisticated enough to perceive certain subtle relationships . . . And yet sophisticated codes had been broken in seconds. And the Project was asking it to distinguish only where a signal existed, whether the reception was random noise or had some element of the unrandom. At this level it wasn't even being asked to note the influence of consciousness.

Note: ask computer — is it missing something? Ridiculous? Ask Olsen.

Maybe they shouldn't be searching the radio spectrum at all. Maybe radio was a peculiarity of man's civilization. Maybe others had never had it or had passed it by and now had more sophisticated means of communication. Lasers, for instance. Telepathy, or what might pass for it with man. Maybe gamma rays, as Morrison suggested years before Ozma.

Well, maybe. But if it were so,

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somebody else would have to listen for those. He had neither the equipment nor the background nor the working lifetime left to tackle something new.

And maybe Adams was right.

He buzzed Lily. "Have you reached Mrs. MacDonald?"

"The telephone hasn't answered —"

Unreasoned panic . . . .

"— oh, here she is now. Mr. MacDonald, Mrs. MacDonald."

"Hello, darling. I was alarmed when you didn't answer." That had been foolish, he thought, and even more foolish to mention it.

Her voice was sleepy. "I must have been dozing." Even drowsy, it was an exciting voice, gentle, a little husky, that speeded MacDonald's pulse. "What did you want?"

"You called me," MacDonald said.

"Did I? I've forgotten."

"Glad you're resting. You didn't sleep well last night."

"I took some pills."

"How many?"

"Just the two you left out."

"Good girl. I'll see you in a couple of hours. Go back to sleep. Sorry I woke you."

But her voice wasn't sleepy any more. "You won't have to go back tonight, will you? We'll have the evening together?"

"We'll see," he promised.

But he knew he would return.

II

MacDonald paused outside the long, low concrete building which housed the offices and laboratories and computers. It was twilight. The sun had descended below the green hills, but orange and purpling wisps of cirrus trailed down the western sky.

Between MacDonald and the sky was a giant dish held aloft by skeleton metal fingers — held high as if to catch the star dust that drifted down at night from the Milky Way.

Go and catch a falling star,
Get with child a mandrake root,
Tell me where all past years are,
Or who cleft the devil's foot;
Teach me to hear mermaids singing,
Or to keep off envy's stinging,
And find
What wind
Serves to advance an honest mind.

Then the dish began to turn, noiselessly, incredibly, and to tip. And it was not a dish any more but an ear, a listening ear cupped by the surrounding hills to overhear the whispering universe.

Perhaps this is what kept them at their jobs, MacDonald thought. In spite of all disappointments, in

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spite of all vain efforts, perhaps it was this massive machinery, as sensitive as their fingertips which kept them struggling with the unfathomable. When they grew weary at their electronic listening posts, when their eyes grew dim with looking at unrevealing dials and studying uneventful graphs, they could step outside their concrete cells and renew their dull spirits in communion with the giant mechanism they commanded, the silent, sensing instrument in which the smallest packets of energy, the smallest waves of matter, were detected in their headlong, eternal flight across the universe. It was the stethoscope with which they took the pulse of the all and noted the birth and death of stars, the probe with which, here on an insignificant planet of an undistinguished star on the edge of its galaxy, they explored the infinite.

Or perhaps it was not just the reality but the imagery, like poetry, which soothed their doubting souls, the bowl held up to catch Donne's falling star, the ear cocked to catch the suspected shout that faded to an indistinguishable murmur by the time it reached them. And one thousand miles above them was the giant, five-mile-in-diameter network, the largest radio telescope ever built, which men had cast into the heavens to catch the stars.

If they had the Big Ear for more than an occasional reference check, MacDonald thought practically, then they might get some results. But he knew the radio astronomers would never relinquish time to the frivolity of listening for signals that never came. It was only because of the Big Ear that the Project had inherited the Little Ear. There had been talk recently about a larger net, twenty miles in diameter. Perhaps when it was done, if it were done, the Project might inherit time on the Big Ear.

If they could endure until then, MacDonald thought, if they could steer their fragile vessel of faith between the Scylla of self-doubt and the Charybdis of Congressional appropriations.

The images were not all favorable. There were others that went boomp in the night. There was the image, for instance, of man listening, listening, listening to the silent stars, listening for an eternity, listening for signals that would never come, because — the ultimate horror — man was alone in the universe, a cosmic accident of self-awareness which needed and would never receive the comfort of companionship. To be alone, to be all alone, would be like being all alone on earth, with no one to talk to, ever — like being alone inside a bone prison,

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with no way to get out, no way to communicate with anyone outside, no way to know if anyone was outside . . .

Perhaps that, in the end, was what kept them going — to stave off the terrors of the night. While they listened there was hope; to give up now would be to admit final defeat. Some said they should never have started; then they never would have the problem of surrender. Some of the new religions said that. The Solitarians, for one. There is nobody there; we are the one, the only created intelligence in the universe. Let us glory in our uniqueness. But the older religions encouraged the Project to continue. Why would God have created the myriads of other stars and other planets if he had not intended them for living creatures? Why should man only be created in His image? Let us find out, they said. Let us communicate with them. What revelations have they had? What saviors have redeemed them?

These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things.

And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.

Dusk had turned to night. The sky had turned to black. The stars had been born again. The listening had begun. MacDonald made his way to his car in the parking lot behind the building, coasted until he was behind the hill, and turned on the motor for the long drive home.

The hacienda was dark. It had that empty feeling about it that MacDonald knew so well, the feeling it had for him when Maria went to visit friends in Mexico City. But it was not empty now. Maria was here.

He opened the door and flicked on the hall light. "Maria?" He walked down the tiled hall, not too fast, not too slow. "*Querida?*" He turned on the living-room light as he passed. He continued down the hall, past the dining room, the guest room, the study, the kitchen. He reached the dark doorway to the bedroom. "Maria Chavez?"

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He turned on the bedroom light, low. She was asleep, her face peaceful, her dark hair scattered across the pillow. She lay on her side, her legs drawn up under the covers.

Men che dramma
Di sangue m'e rimaso, che no tremi;
Conosco i segni dell' antica fiamma.[3]

MacDonald looked down at her, comparing her features one by one with those he had fixed in his memory. Even now, with those dark, expressive eyes closed, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. What glories they had known! He renewed his spirit in the warmth of his remembrances, recalling moments with loving detail.

C'est de quoy j'ay le plus de peur que la peur.[4]

He sat down upon the edge of the bed and leaned over to kiss her upon the cheek and then upon her upthrust shoulder where the gown had slipped down. She did not waken. He shook her shoulder gently. "Maria!" She turned upon her back, straightening. She sighed, and her eyes came open, staring blankly. "It is Robby," MacDonald said, dropping unconsciously into a faint brogue.

Her eyes came alive, and her lips smiled sleepily. "Robby. You're home."

"*Yo te amo*," he murmured, and kissed her on the lips. As he pulled himself away, he said, "I'll start dinner. Wake up and get dressed. I'll see you in half an hour. Or sooner."

"Sooner," she said.

He turned and went to the kitchen. There was romaine lettuce in the refrigerator and, as he rummaged further, some thin slices of veal. He prepared Caesar salad and veal scallopine, doing it all quickly, expertly. He liked to cook. The salad was ready and the lemon juice, tarragon, white wine and, a minute later, the beef bouillon had been added to the browned veal when Maria appeared.

She stood in the doorway, slim, lithe, lovely, and sniffed the air. "I smell something delicious."

It was a joke. When Maria cooked, she cooked Mexican, something peppery that burned all the way into the stomach and lay there like a banked furnace. When MacDonald cooked, it was something exotic — French, per-

3 Less than a drop of blood remains in me that does not tremble; I recognize the signals of the ancient flame.
— Dante, **Purgatorio.**

4 The thing of which I have most fear is fear.
— Montaigne, **Essays.**

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haps, or Italian or Chinese. But whoever cooked, the other had to appreciate it or take over all the cooking for a week.

MacDonald filled their wine glasses. "'*A la tres-bonne, a la tres belle,*'" he said, "'*qui fait ma joie et ma sante.*'"[5]

"To the Project," Maria said. "May there be a signal received tonight."

MacDonald shook his head. One should not mention what one desires too much. "Tonight there is only us."

Afterwards there were only the two of them, as there had been now for twenty years. And she was as alive and as urgent, as filled with love and laughter, as when they first had been together.

At last the urgency was replaced by a vast ease and contentment in which for a time the thought of the Project faded into something remote which one day he would return to and finish. "Maria," he said.

"Robby?"

"*Yo te amo, corazon.*"

"*Yo te amo,* Robby."

Gradually then, as he waited for her breathing to slow, the Project returned. When he thought she was asleep, he got up and began to dress in the dark.

"Robby?" Her voice was awake and frightened.

"*Querida?*"

"You are going again?"

"I didn't want to wake you."

"Do you have to go?"

"It's my job."

"Just this once. Stay with me tonight."

He turned on the light. In the dimness he could see that her face was concerned but not hysterical. "'*Rast ich, so rost ich.*'[6] Besides, I would feel ashamed."

"I understand. Go, then. Come home soon."

He put out two pills on the little shelf in the bathroom and put the others away again.

III

The headquarters building was busiest at night when the radio noise of the sun was least and listening to the stars was best. Girls bustled down the halls with coffee pots, and men stood near the water fountain talking earnestly.

MacDonald went into the control room. Adams was at the control panel; Montaleone was the technician. Adams looked up, pointed to his earphones with a gesture of futility, and shrugged. MacDonald nodded at him, nodded at Montaleone and glanced at the graph. It looked random to him.

[5] To the best, to the most beautiful who is my joy and my well-being.
— Baudelaire, Les Epaves.

[6] When I rest, I rust.
— German proverb.

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Adams leaned past him to point out a couple of peaks. "These might be something."

"Odds," MacDonald said.

"Suppose you're right. The computer hasn't sounded any alarms."

"After a few years of looking at these things, you get the feel of them. You begin to think like a computer."

"Or you get oppressed by failure."

"There's that."

The room was shiny and efficient, glass and metal and plastic, all smooth and sterile; and it smelled like electricity. MacDonald knew that electricity had no smell, but that was the way he thought of it. Perhaps it was the ozone that smelled or warm insulation or oil. Whatever it was, it wasn't worth the time to find out, and MacDonald didn't really want to know. He would rather think of it as the smell of electricity. Perhaps that was why he was a failure as a scientist. "A scientist is a man who wants to know why," his teachers always had told him.

MacDonald leaned over the control panel and flicked a switch. A thin, hissing noise filled the room. It was something like air escaping from an inner tube — a susuration of surreptitious sibilants from subterranean sessions of seething serpents.

He turned a knob, and the sound became what someone had called — Tennyson? — "the murmuring of innumerable bees." Again, and it became something from Matthew Arnold.

... melancholy, long withdrawing roar
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

He turned the knob once more, and the sound was a babble of distant voices, some shouting, some screaming, some conversing calmly, some whispering — all of them trying beyond desperation to communicate, and everything just below the level of intelligibility. If he closed his eyes, MacDonald could almost see their faces, pressed against a distant screen, distorted with the awful effort to make themselves heard and understood.

But they all insisted on speaking at once. MacDonald wanted to shout at them. "Silence, everybody! All of you but you — there, with the purple antenna. One at a time, and we'll listen to all of you if it takes a hundred years or a hundred lifetimes."

MacDonald's hand dropped away from the knob.

"Sometimes," Adams said, "I

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think it was a mistake to put in the speaker system. You begin to anthropomorphize. After a while you begin to hear things. Sometimes you even get messages. I don't listen to the voices any more. I used to wake up in the night with someone whispering to me. I was just on the verge of getting the message that would solve everything, and I would wake up." He flicked off the switch.

"Maybe someday somebody will get the message," MacDonald said. "That's what the audio frequency translation is intended to do. To keep the attention focused. It can mesmerize and it can torment, but these are the conditions out of which spring inspiration."

"Also madness," Adams said. "You've got to be able to continue."

"Yes." MacDonald picked up the earphones Adams had put down and held one of them to his ear.

"Tico-tico, tico-tico," it sang. "They're listening in Puerto Rico. Listening for words that never come. Tico-tico, tico-tico. They're listening in Puerto Rico. Can it be the stars are stricken dumb?"

MacDonald put the earphones down and smiled. "Maybe there's inspiration in that, too."

"At least it takes my mind off the futility."

"Maybe off the job, too? Do you really want to find anyone out there?"

"Why else would I be here? But there are times when I wonder if we would not be better off not knowing."

"We all think that sometimes," MacDonald said.

In his office he attacked the stack of papers and letters again. When he had worked his way to the bottom, he sighed and got up, stretching. He wondered if he would feel better, less frustrated, less uncertain, if he were working on the Problem instead of just working so somebody else could work on the Problem. But somebody had to do it. Somebody had to keep the Project going, personnel coming in, funds in the bank, feathers smoothed.

Maybe it was more important that he do all the dirty little work in the office. Of course it was routine. Of course Lily could do it as well as he. But it was important that he do it, that there be somebody in charge who believed in the Project — or who never let his doubts be known.

Like the Little Ear, he was a symbol — and it is by symbols men live, or refuse to let their despair overwhelm them.

The janitor was waiting for him in the outer office.

"Can I see you, Mr. MacDonald?" the janitor said.

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"Of course, Joe," MacDonald said, locking the door of his office carefully behind him. "What is it?"

"It's my teeth, sir." The old man got to his feet and with a deft movement of his tongue and mouth dropped his teeth into his hand.

MacDonald stared at them with a twinge of revulsion. There was nothing wrong with them. They were a carefully constructed set of false teeth, but they looked too real. MacDonald always had shuddered away from that which seemed to be what it was not, as if it were treacherously false.

"They talk to me, Mr. MacDonald," the janitor mumbled, staring at the teeth with what seemed like suspicion. "In the glass beside my bed at night, they whisper to me. About things far off, like. Messages, like."

MacDonald started. It was a strange word for the old man to use, and hard to say without teeth. Still, the word had been "messages." But why should it be strange? He could have picked it up around the offices or the laboratories. It would be odd, indeed, if he had not picked up something about what was going on. Of course, messages.

"I've heard of that sort of thing happening," MacDonald said. "False teeth accidentally constructed into a kind of crystal set, that pick up radio waves. Particularly near a powerful station. And we have a lot of stray frequencies floating around, what with the antennas and all. Tell you what, Joe. We'll make an appointment with the Project dentist to fix your teeth so that they don't bother you. Any small alteration should do it."

"Thank you, Mr. MacDonald," the old man said. He fitted his teeth back into his mouth. "You're a great man, Mr. MacDonald."

MacDonald drove the ten dark miles to the hacienda with a vague feeling of unease, as if he had done something during the day or left something undone that should have been otherwise.

But the house was dark when he drove up in front, not empty-dark as it had seemed to him a few hours before but friendly-dark. Maria was asleep, breathing peacefully.

IV

The house was brilliant with lighted windows that cast long fingers into the night, probing the dark hills, and the sound of many voices stirred echoes until the countryside itself seemed alive.

"Come in, Lily," MacDonald said at the door, and was reminded of a winter scene when a Lily had met the gentlemen at the

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door and helped them off with their overcoats. But that was another Lily and another occasion and another place and somebody else's imagination. "I'm glad you decided to come." He had a can of beer in his hand and he waved it in the general direction of the major center of noisemaking. "There's beer in the living room and something more potent in the study — 190 proof grain alcohol, to be precise. Be careful with that. It will sneak up on you. But — *'nunc est bibendum!'* "[7]

"Where's Mrs. MacDonald?" Lily asked.

"Back there, somewhere." MacDonald waved again. "The men, and a few brave women, are in the study. The women, and a few brave men, are in the living room. The kitchen is common territory. Take your choice."

"I really shouldn't have come," Lily said. "I offered to spell Mr. Saunders in the control room, but he said I hadn't been checked out. It isn't as if the computer couldn't handle it all alone, and I know enough to call somebody if anything unexpected should happen."

"Shall I tell you something, Lily?" MacDonald said. "The computer could do it alone. And you and the computer could do it better than any of us, including me. But if the men ever feel that they are unnecessary, they would feel more useless than ever. They would give up. And they mustn't do that."

"Oh, Mac!" Lily said.

"They mustn't do that. Because one of them is going to come up with the inspiration that solves it all. Not me. One of them. We'll send somebody to relieve Charley before the evening is over."

Wer immer strebens sich bemuht,
Den konnen wir erlosen.[8]

Lily sighed. "Okay, boss."

"And enjoy yourself!"

"Okay, boss, okay."

"Find a man, Lily," MacDonald muttered. And then he, too, turned toward the living room, for Lily was expected last.

He listened for a moment at the doorway, sipping slowly from the warming can.

"— work more on gamma rays —"

"Who's got the money to build a generator? Since nobody's built one yet, we don't even know what it might cost."

"— gamma ray sources should be a million times more rare than radio sources at twenty-one centimeters —"

7 Now's the time for drinking!
— Horace, **Odes.**

8 Who strives always to the utmost, him can we save.
— Goethe, **Faust.**

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"That's what Cocconi said nearly fifty years ago. The same arguments. Always the same arguments."

"If they're right, they're right."

"But the hydrogen emission line is so uniquely logical. As Morrison said to Cocconi — and Cocconi, if you remember, agreed — it represents a logical, prearranged rendezvous point. 'A unique, objective standard of frequency, which must be known to every observer of the universe,' was the way they put it."

"— but the noise level —"

MacDonald smiled and moved on to the kitchen for a cold can of beer.

"— Bracewell's 'automated messengers'?" a voice asked querulously.

"What about them?"

"Why aren't we looking for them?"

"The point of Bracewell's messengers is that they make themselves known to us!"

"Maybe there's something wrong with ours. After a few million years in orbit —"

"— laser beams make more sense."

"And get lost in all that star shine?"

"As Schwartz and Townes pointed out, all you have to do is select a wavelength of light that is absorbed by stellar atmospheres. Put a narrow laser beam in the center of one of the calcium absorption lines —"

In the study they were talking about quantum noise.

"Quantum noise favors low frequencies."

"But the noise itself sets a lower limit on those frequencies."

"Drake calculated the most favorable frequencies, considering the noise level, lie between 3.2 and 8.1 centimeters."

"Drake! Drake! What did he know? We've had nearly fifty years experience on him. Fifty years of technological advance. Fifty years ago we could send radio messages 1,000 light-years and laser signals 10 light-years. Today those figures are 10,000 and 500 at least."

"What if nobody's there?" Adams said gloomily.

Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint.[9]

"Short-pulse it, like Oliver suggested. One hundred million billion watts in a ten-billionths of a second would smear across the entire radio spectrum. Here, Mac, fill this, will you?"

And MacDonald wandered away through the clustering guests toward the bar.

"And I told Charley," said a woman to two other women in

[9] I am the spirit that always denies. — Goethe, **Faust.**

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the corner, "if I had a dime for every dirty diaper I've changed, I sure wouldn't be sitting here in Puerto Rico —"

"— neutrinos," said somebody.

"Nuts," said somebody else, as MacDonald poured grain alcohol carefully into the glass and filled it with orange juice. "The only really logical medium is Q waves."

"I know — the waves we haven't discovered yet but are going to discover about ten years from now. Only here it is nearly fifty years after Morrison suggested it, and we still haven't discovered them."

MacDonald wended his way back across the room.

"It's the night work that gets me," said someone's wife. "The kids up all day, and then he wants me there to greet him when he gets home at dawn. Brother!"

"Or what if everybody's listening?" Adams said gloomily. "Maybe everybody's sitting there, listening, just the way we are, because it's so much cheaper than sending."

"Here you are," MacDonald said.

"But don't you suppose somebody would have thought of that by this time and begin to send?"

"Double-think it all the way through and figure what just occurred to you would have occurred to everybody else, so you might as well listen. Think about it — everybody sitting around, listening. If there is anybody. Either way it makes the skin creep."

"All right, then, we ought to send something."

"What would you send?"

"I'd have to think about it. Prime numbers, maybe."

"Think some more. What if a civilization weren't mathematical?"

"Idiot! How would they build an antenna?"

"Maybe they'd rule-of-thumb it, like a ham. Or maybe they have built-in antenna."

"And maybe you have built-in antenna and don't know it."

MacDonald's can of beer was empty. He wandered back toward the kitchen again.

"— insist on equal time with the Big Ear. Even if nobody's sending we could pick up the normal electronic commerce of a civilization tens of light-years away. The problem would be deciphering, not hearing."

"They're picking it up now, when they're studying the relatively close systems. Ask for a tape and work out your program."

"All right, I will. Just give me a chance to work up a request —"

MacDonald found himself beside Maria. He put his arm around her waist and pulled her

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close "All right?" he said to her.

"All right."

Her face was tired, though, MacDonald thought. He dreaded the notion that she might be growing older, that she was entering middle age. He could face it for himself. He could feel the years piling up inside his bones. He still thought of himself, inside, as twenty, but he knew that he was forty-seven, and mostly he was glad that he had found happiness and love and peace and serenity. He even was willing to pay the price in youthful exuberance and belief in his personal immortality. But not Maria!

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
Che la diritta via era smarrita.[10]

"Sure?"

She nodded.

He leaned close to her ear. "I wish it was just the two of us, as usual."

"I, too."

"I'm going to leave in a little while —"

"Must you?"

"I must relieve Saunders. He's on duty. Give him an opportunity to celebrate a little with the others."

"Can't you send somebody else?"

"Who?" MacDonald gestured with good humored futility at all the clusters of people held together by bonds of ordered sounds shared consecutively. "It's a good party. No one will miss me."

"I will."

"Of course, *querida.*"

"You are their mother, father, priest, all in one," Maria said. "You worry about them too much."

"I must keep them together. What else am I good for?"

"For much more."

MacDonald hugged her with one arm.

"Look at Mac and Maria, will you?" said someone who was having trouble with his consonants. "What God-damned devotion!"

MacDonald smiled and suffered himself to be pounded on the back while he protected Maria in front of him. "I'll see you later," he said.

As he passed the living room someone was saying, "Like Edie said, we ought to look at the long-chain molecules in carbonaceous chondrites. No telling how far they've traveled — or been sent — or what messages might be coded in the molecules."

[10] In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost.
— Dante, **Inferno.**

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As he closed the front door behind him, the noise dropped to a roar and then a mutter. He stopped for a moment at the door of the car and looked up at the sky.

E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.[11]

The noise from the hacienda reminded him of something — the speakers in the control room. All those voices talking, talking, and from here he could not understand a thing.

Somewhere *there* was an idea if he could only concentrate on it hard enough. But he had drunk one beer too many — or perhaps one too few.

V

After long hours of listening to the voices, MacDonald always felt a little crazy, but tonight it was worse than usual. Perhaps it was all the conversation before, or the beers, or something else — some deeper concern that would not surface.

But then the listeners had to be crazy to begin with — to get committed to a project that might go for centuries without results.

Tico-tico, tico-tico . . .

Even if they could pick up a message, they still would likely be dead and gone before any exchange could take place even with the nearest likely star. What kind of mad dedication could sustain such perseverance?

They're listening in Puerto Rico . . .

Religion could. At least once it did, during the era of cathedral building in Europe, the cathedrals that took centuries to build.

"What are you doing, fellow?"

"I'm working for ten francs a day."

"And what are you doing?"

"I'm laying stone."

"And you — what are you doing?"

"I am building a cathedral."

They were building cathedrals, most of them. Most of them had that religious mania about their mission that would sustain them through a lifetime of labors in which no progress could be seen.

Listening for words that never come . . .

The mere layers of stone and those who worked for pay alone eliminated themselves in time and left only those who kept alive in themselves the concept, the dream.

But they had to be a little mad to begin with.

Can it be the stars are stricken dumb?

Tonight he had heard the voices nearly all night long. They

[11] And thence we issued out, again to see the stars.
— **Dante, Inferno.**

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kept trying to tell him something, something urgent, something he should do, but he could not quite make out the words. There was only the babble of distant voices, urgent and unintelligible.

Tico-tico, tico-tic . . .

He had wanted to shout "Shut up!" to the universe. "One at a time! . . . You first!" But of course there was no way to do that. Or had he tried? Had he shouted?

They're listening with ears this big!

Had he dozed at the console with the voices mumbling in his ears, or had he only thought he dozed? Or had he only dreamed he waked? Or dreamed he dreamed?

Listening for thoughts just like their own.

There was a madness to it all, but perhaps it was a divine madness. And is not that madness that which sustains man in his terrible self-knowledge, the driving madness which demands reason of a casual universe, the awful aloneness which seeks among the stars for companionship?

Can it be that we are all alone?

The ringing of the telephone half-penetrated through the mists of mesmerization. He picked up the handset half-expecting that it would be the universe calling, perhaps with a clipped British accent. "Hello there, Man. Hello. Hello. I say, we seem to have a bad connection, what? Just wanted you to know that we're here. Are you there? Are you listening? Message on the way. May not get there for a couple of centuries. Do be around to answer, will you? That's a good being. Righto . . ."

Only it wasn't. It was the familiar American voice of Charley Saunders saying, "Mac, there's been an accident. Olsen is on his way to relieve you, but I think you'd better leave now. It's Maria."

Leave it. Leave it all. What does it matter? But leave the controls on automatic; the computer can take care of it all. Maria! Get in the car. Start it. Don't fumble! That's it. Go. Go. Car passing. Must be Olsen. No matter.

What kind of accident? Why didn't I ask? What does it matter what kind of accident? Maria. Nothing could have happened. Nothing serious. Not with all those people around. *Nil desperandum.*[12] And yet — why did Charley call if it was not serious? Must be serious. I must be prepared for something bad, something that will shake the world, that will tear my insides.

I must not break up in front

[12] There's no cause for despair. — Horace, Odes.

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of them. Why not? Why must I appear infallible? Why must I always be cheerful, imperturbable, my faith unshaken? Why me? If there is something bad, if something impossibly bad has happened to Maria, what will matter? Ever? Why didn't I ask Charley what it was? Why? The bad can wait; it will get no worse for being unknown.

What does the universe care for my agony? I am nothing. My feelings are nothing to anyone but me. My only possible meaning to the universe is the Project. Only this slim potential links me with eternity. My love and my agony are me, but the significance of my life or death is the Project.

HIC SITUS EST PHAETHON CVRRVS AURIGA PATERNI
QVEM SI NON TENVIT MAGNIS TAMEN EXCIDIT AVSIS[13]

By the time he reached the hacienda, MacDonald was breathing evenly. His emotions were under control. Dawn had grayed the eastern sky. It was a customary hour for Project personnel to be going home. All seemed normal.

Saunders met him at the door. "Doctor Lessenden is here. He's with Maria."

The odor of stale smoke and the memory of babble still lingered in the air, but someone had been busy. The party remains had been cleaned up. No doubt they had all pitched in. They were good people.

"Betty found her in the bathroom off your bedroom. She wouldn't have been there except the others were occupied. I blame myself. I shouldn't have let you relieve me. Maybe if you had been here . . . But I knew you wanted it that way."

"No one's to blame. She was alone a great deal," MacDonald said. "What happened?"

"Didn't I tell you? Her wrists. Slashed with a razor. Both of them. Betty found her in the bathtub. Like pink lemonade, she said."

Perce jusques au fond du coeur
D'une atteinte imprevue aussi bien que mortelle.[14]

A fist tightened inside MacDonald's gut and then slowly relaxed. Yes, it had been that. He had known it, hadn't he? He had known it would happen ever since the sleeping pills, even though he had kept telling himself, as she

[13] Here Phaeton lies: in Phoebus' car he fared. And though he greatly failed, more greatly dared.
— Ovid, Metamorphoses.

[14] Pierced to the depth of my heart by a blow unforeseen — and mortal.
— Corneille, Le Cid.

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had told him, that the overdose had been an accident.

Or had he known? He knew only that Saunders' news had been no surprise.

Then they were at the bedroom door, and Maria was lying under a blanket on the bed, scarcely making it mound over her body, and her arms were on top of the blankets, palms up, bandages like white paint across the olive perfection of her arms — now, MacDonald reminded himself, no longer perfection but marred with ugly red lips that spoke to him of hidden misery and untold sorrow and a life that was a lie . . . .

Doctor Lessenden looked up, sweat trickling down from his hairline. "The bleeding is stopped, but she's lost a good deal of blood. I've got to take her to the hospital for a transfusion. The ambulance should be here any minute." He paused. MacDonald looked at Maria's face. It was paler than he had ever seen it. It looked almost waxen as if it were already arranged for all time on a satin pillow. "Her chances are fifty-fifty," Lessenden said.

And then the attendants pushed their way past him with their litter.

"Betty found this on her dressing table," Saunders said. He handed MacDonald a slip of paper folded once.

MacDonald unfolded it: *Je m'en vay chercher un grand Peut-etre.*[15]

VI

Everyone was surprised to see MacDonald at the office. They did not say anything, and he did not volunteer the information that he could not bear to sit at home, among the remembrances, and wait for word to come. But they asked him about Maria, and he said, "Doctor Lessenden is hopeful. She's still unconscious. Apparently will be for some time. The doctor said I might as well wait here as at the hospital. I think I made them nervous. They're hopeful. Maria's still unconscious . . ."

O lente, lente currite, noctis equi! . . .[16]
The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike . . . .

Finally MacDonald was alone. He pulled out paper and pencil and worked for a long time on the statement, and then he balled it up and threw it into the wastebasket, scribbled a single sentence on another sheet of paper, and called Lily.

[15] I am going to seek a great perhaps. — Rabelais on his deathbed.

[16] Oh slowly, slowly run, horses of the night! . . . — Marlowe, Dr. Faustus.

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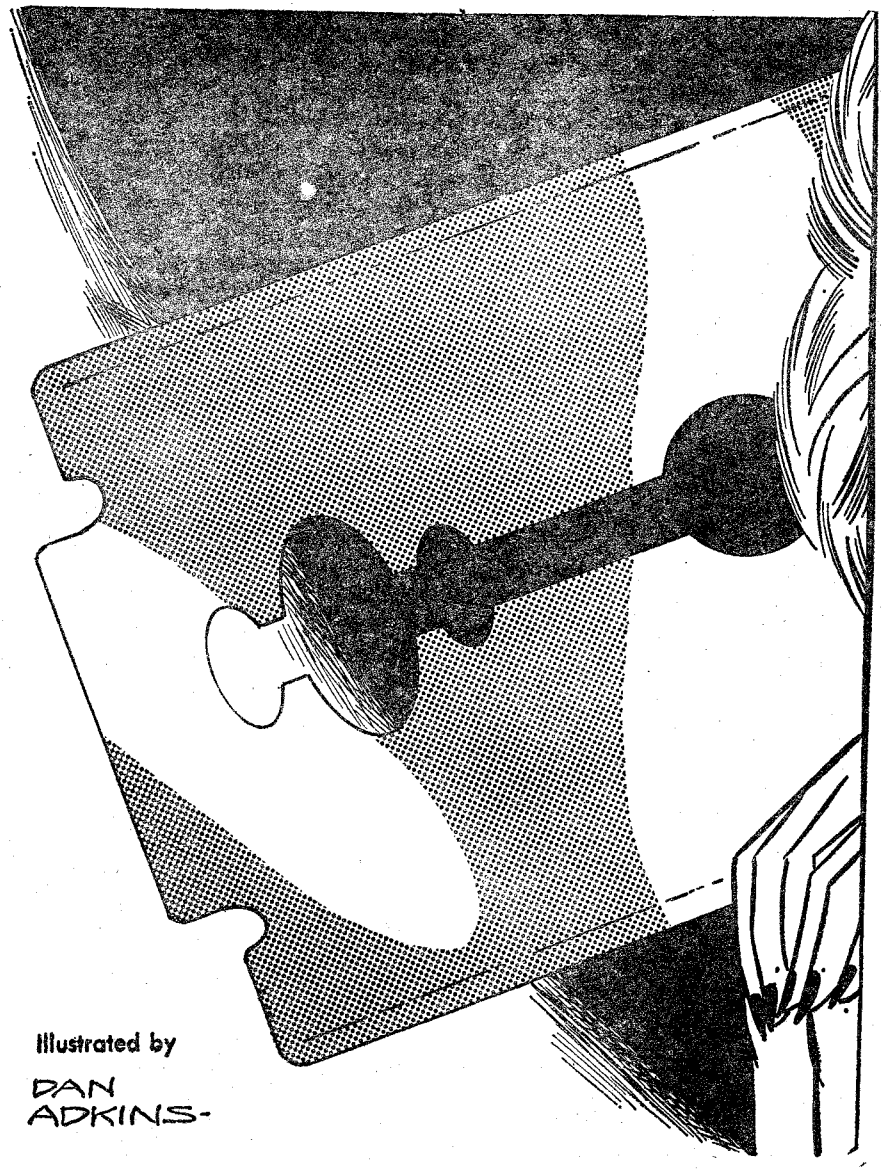

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She came in almost immediately.

"Send this!"

She glanced at it. "No, Mac, I can't."

"Send it!"

"But —"

"It's not an impulse. I've thought it over carefully. Send it."

Slowly she left, holding the piece of paper gingerly in her fingertips. MacDonald pushed the papers around on his desk, waiting for the telephone to ring. But, without knocking, unannounced, Saunders came through the door first.

"You can't do this, Mac," Saunders said.

MacDonald sighed. "Lily told you. I would fire that girl if she weren't so loyal."

"Of course she told me. This isn't just you. It affects the whole Project."

"That's what I'm thinking about."

"I think I know what you're going through, Mac —" Saunders stopped. "No, of course I don't know what you're going through. It must be hell. But don't desert us. Think of the Project!"

"That's what I'm thinking about. I'm a failure, Charley. Everything I touch — ashes."

"You're the best of us."

"A poor linguist? An indifferent engineer? I have no qualifications for this job, Charley. You need someone with ideas to head the Project, someone dynamic, someone who can lead, someone with — charisma."

A few minutes later he went over it all again with Olsen. When he came to the qualifications part, all Olsen could say was: "You give a good party, Mac."

It was Adams, the skeptic, who affected him most. "Mac, you're what I believe in instead of God."

Sonnenborn said, "You are the Project. If you go it all falls apart. It's over."

"It seems like it, always, but it never happens to those things that have life in them. The Project was here before I came. It will be here after I leave. It must be longer lived than any of us, because we are for the years and it is for the centuries."

After Sonnenborn, MacDonald told Lily wearily. "No more, Lily."

None of them had had the courage to mention Maria, but MacDonald had considered that failure, too. She had tried to communicate with him a month ago when she took the pills, and he had been unable to understand. How could he riddle the stars when he couldn't even understand those closest to him. Now he had to pay.

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Meine Ruh'ist hin,
Meine Herz ist schwer.[17]

What would Maria want? He knew what she wanted, but, if she lived, he could not let her pay that price. Too long she had been there when he wanted her, waiting like a doll put away on a shelf for him to return and take her down, so that he could have the strength to continue.

And somehow the agony had built up inside her, the dreadful progress of the years, most dread of all to a beautiful woman growing old, alone, too much alone. He had been selfish. He had kept her to himself. He had not wanted children to mar the perfection of their being together.

Perfection for him; less than that for her.

Perhaps it was not too late for them if she lived. And if she died — he would not have the heart to go on with work to which, he knew now, he could contribute nothing.

Que acredito su ventura,
Morir querdo y vivir loco.[18]

And finally the call came. "She's going to be all right, Mac," Lessenden said. And after a moment, "Mac, I said —"

"I heard."

"She wants to see you."

"I'll be there."

"She said to give you a message. 'Tell Robby I've been a little crazy in the head. I'll be better now. That great perhaps looks too certain from here. And tell him not to be crazy in the head, too.' "

MacDonald put down the telephone and walked through the doorway and through the outer office, a feeling in his chest as if it were going to burst. "She's going to be all right," he threw over his shoulder at Lily.

"Oh, Mac —"

In the hall, Joe the janitor stopped him. "Mr. MacDonald —"

MacDonald stopped. "Been to the dentist yet, Joe?"

"No, sir, not yet, but it's not —"

"Don't go. I'd like to put a tape recorder beside your bed for a while, Joe. Who knows?"

"Thank you, sir. But it's . . . They say you're leaving, Mr. MacDonald."

"Somebody else will do it."

"You don't understand. Don't go, Mr. MacDonald!"

"Why not, Joe?"

"You're the one who cares."

MacDonald had been about to move on, but that stopped him.

[17] My peace is gone,
My heart is heavy.
— Goethe, **Faust.**

[18] For if he like a madman lived,
At least he like a wise one died.
— Cervantes, **Don Quixote.**

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Ful wys is he that kan hymselven knowe!

He turned and went back to the office. "Have you got that sheet of paper, Lily?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you sent it?"

"No, sir."

"Bad girl. Give it to me."

He read the sentence on the paper once more: *I have great confidence in the goals and ultimate success of the Project, but for personal reasons I must submit my resignation.*

He studied it for a moment.

Pigmaei gigantum humeris impositi plusquam ipsi gigantes vident.[19]

And he tore it up.

— JAMES E. GUNN

[19] A dwarf standing on the shoulder of a giant may see farther than a giant himself.
— Lucan, **De Bello Civili.**

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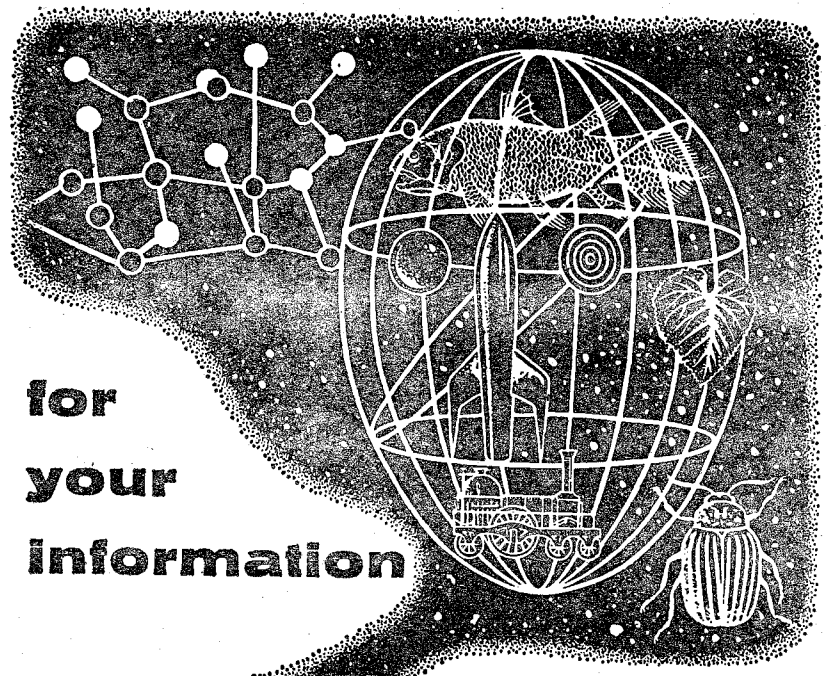

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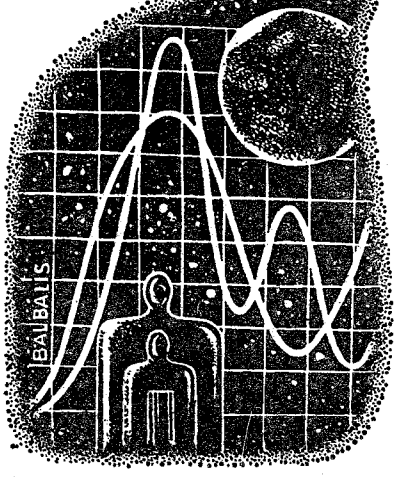
BY WILLY LEY



Mission To A Comet

It is one of the by-products of the Space Age that comet fear, still rampant in 1910-11 at the latest appearance of Halley's comet, is a thing of the past. But while hardly anybody is afraid of comets any more, the old curiosity, possibly with a very faint

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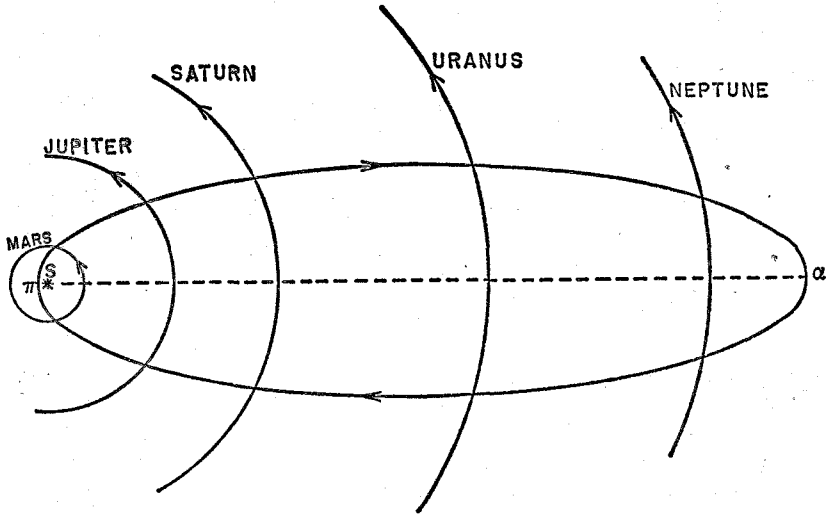

Fig. 1. The Orbit of Halley's Comet as it is usually shown. The diagram is slightly misleading because it fails to show the inclination of the comet's orbit to the ecliptic.

tinge of awe, has remained. We still want to know everything that can be known about a comet. Since telescopes, astronomical cameras and spectroscopes have done everything they could, it is quite natural to look in the general direction of the latest astronomical tool, the space probe.

Have we progressed far enough to send a mission to a comet? The answer is yes; we can and we should, if we can find a suitable comet, one that is well behaved.

To find out what constitutes good behavior on the part of a comet, we have to consider first that we are going to shoot from a moving platform: our earth. The earth moves in its orbit at the rate of 18½ miles per second. The distance from the sun is virtually uniform; during the first week of January it is 91½ million miles and during the first week of July it is 94½ million miles, a difference of only 3 per cent. When the earth is closest to the sun (perihelion) it must, in accordance with Kepler's Second Law, move somewhat faster than at the time when it is farthest from the sun (aphelion), but again the difference in orbital velocity is minor.

As distinct from the nearly circular orbits of the planets, the orbits of comets are quite elon-

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TABLE OF SHORT-PERIOD COMETS

Name	Period Years	Perihelion and Aphelion in A.U.	Eccentricity	Inclination to ecliptic	Next predicted perihelion passage
Encke	3.3	0.34/4.09	0.847	12°.4	January 1971
Forbes	6.24	1.54/5.37	0.553	4°.6	July 1974
Gale	11.0	1.18/8.7	0.76	11°.7	Spring 1970
Giacobini-Zinner	6.42	0.94/5.97	0.729	30°.9	August 1972
Grigg-Skjellerup	4.91	0.86/4.92	0.703	17°.6	September 1969
Honda-Mrkos	5.21	0.56/5.41	0.815	13°.2	October 1972
Kopff	6.32	1.52/5.32	0.556	4°.7	October 1970
Pons-Winnecke	6.16	1.16/5.56	0.655	21°.7	June 1968
Schaumasse	8.18	1.2/6.9	0.705	12°	July 1970
Temple-2	5.26	1.36/4.68	0.549	12°.5	August 1972
Tuttle	13.6	1.02/10.38	0.821	54°.7	Late in 1980
Tuttle-Giacobini	5.48	1.12/5.10	0.641	13°.8	January 1981

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gated, with one notable exception. Fig. 1 shows a diagram of the orbit of Halley's comet; it is correct as far as it goes; we'll discuss later what this diagram fails to show. The more elongated the orbit of a comet, the greater the difference of its orbital velocity at perihelion and aphelion.

For a mission to a comet we would like to find one which has an orbit with aphelion or perihelion close to the earth's distance from the sun. The "ideal" comet for a probe would be one that orbits the sun inside the orbit of the earth, with aphelion near the earth's orbit. If there were such a comet, it would have an orbital velocity at aphelion not very different from the earth's orbital velocity. However, no such comet is known, so we have to look around for the next best thing.

That next best thing is a comet with its perihelion near the earth's orbit, where the comet will move faster than the earth. But if the orbit of the comet is not excessively elongated, the difference between the comet's and the earth's velocities would be manageable. Here nature has provided a fairly large selection; four such comets are shown in Fig. 2. At first glance, the least suitable of the four is comet Encke, because it crosses the earth's orbit and the velocity difference is considerable.

But a diagram is not good enough to show what is going on; figures are needed. They were assembled in a table by J. C. Lair half a dozen years ago — but this table is by no means a complete listing of all the known comets with orbital periods of a dozen years or less. There are at least a score of others.

Now with this table as a guide, we can go to work, eliminating the difficult cases and retaining the more promising ones. Going first by the proximity of the comet's perihelion to the earth's orbit, comets Gale, Giacobini-Zinner, Pons-Winnecke, Schaumasse, Tuttle and Tuttle-Giacobini all look fine. None of them is more than 20 per cent farther from the sun than the earth's orbit. But they all have rather elongated orbits, a fact that is expressed by the figure for the eccentricity in the third column. A comet with an orbit of high eccentricity will move very fast at its perihelion. Let us assume that we have two comets, both with perihelia at the orbit of the earth, or one A.U. (astronomical unit) from the sun. One of these two comets has its aphelion five A.U. from the sun, but the aphelion of the other is ten A.U. from the sun. The one with the aphelion farther away, the one with the longer ellipse, will move much faster at its perihelion than the

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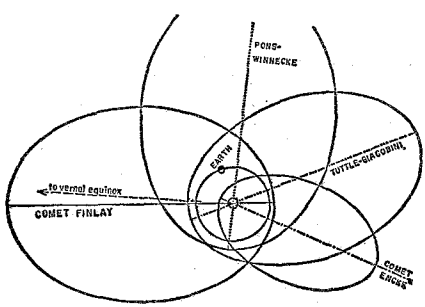
one with the shorter ellipse.

So let us say, somewhat arbitrarily, that we reject comets with an orbital eccentricity of 0.7 or larger. This leaves only two: Pons-Winnecke and Tuttle-Giacobini. Now we'll progress to the next point, the inclination of the comet's orbit to the ecliptic. The ecliptic is the plane of the orbit of the earth; something moving in the same plane would be said to have an inclination of zero. Something moving in an orbit with its plane at an angle to the ecliptic is said to have an inclination of so and so many degrees of arc. A mission to a body moving in an inclined orbit is more expensive in terms of fuel and generally more difficult; the higher the inclination the more difficult the out-of-ecliptic mission.

Looking at our two comets with otherwise reasonable orbits, we find to our dismay that just these two show rather high inclinations, 21°.7 and 13°.8 respectively. The sad result is that none of the comets of our original list has an orbit that would be easy to reach.

Fig. 2. The Orbits of four short-period comets. Comet Encke is the only known short-period comet with its perihelion inside the orbit of Mercury.



At the same time, a glance at the table immediately reveals two comets with low inclination, namely comets Forbes and Kopff. Both also have low eccentricities — about 0.55 in both cases — but the perihelia of both are rather far away, about 1.5 A.U. — a little farther than the orbit of Mars. If a choice had to be made now, it would consist of a careful weighing of a number of points not yet mentioned — as for example, the question of how well the orbit of the comet is known. It might be that the orbit of Tuttle-Giacobini is far better known than that of Kopff (I believe this is the case) so that better knowledge would overcome the general unhappiness caused by high inclinations. Or the choice may be influenced by the fact that one of the two comets happens to be observable in the sky for a few months prior to the date of departure of the mission. Then a good orbit could be established just before the mission gets underway.

Somewhat ironically, the comet

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with the best-known orbit, namely Encke, which has been under observation since 1786 and has the shortest orbital period of any comet, has a particularly unsuitable orbit for interception. Its orbit is too eccentric; the velocity with which it crosses the earth's orbit is too high; its perihelion is far inside the earth's orbit, and its velocity at perihelion is such that a probe would have difficulty matching it.

Instead of trying for Encke's comet, it might be better to get a precise orbit determination for comet Forbes or comet Kopff. The latter is due back at its perihelion in October, 1970; the former has just passed through its perihelion and is due back in July, 1974. Of course, it is known that things can easily go wrong with comet orbits. Since the comets themselves have so little mass, they are easy victims of the gravitational fields of the larger planets. About a century ago the small comet Biela was even torn in two. Unless a comet orbit is very well known, it is impossible to predict the orbital changes a passage near a major planet will produce. But even with an imperfectly known orbit, it is at least possible to compute whether the comet will come close to a major planet. In other words, even with an imperfectly known orbit one might be able to say that orbital changes are unlikely because the comet, on this particular trip around the sun, will not come near a planet.

Just what is a mission to a comet supposed to find out? The currently accepted idea of the nature of a comet is the one conceived by Fred L. Whipple a few decades ago: a comet consists of frozen gases. Solid matter, namely cosmic dust, is indubitably imbedded in these frozen gases, but it is only a minor constituent. When the comet comes within a certain distance of the sun, somewhere between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, the frozen gases begin to evaporate, forming the so-called coma (literally: head of hair) around the comet's body, called the nucleus. Soon the radiation pressure of the sun "blows" some of the coma away so that it streams behind as a tail.

Measuring the length of the tail and the diameter of the coma by astronomical observations is no problem, if we disregard the question of whether the tail as well as the coma may have invisible portions of very low density. Estimating the diameter of the nucleus is already difficult, and calculations of the mass of a nucleus show a wide divergence. The same goes for estimates about the density of the coma.

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A probe flying through a comet's tail and its coma, moving with nearly the same velocity relative to the sun as the comet itself, would answer these questions. Though the mass of a comet is small compared to that of a planet, it is gigantic compared to that of the probe. The probe would therefore be deflected from its pre-calculated course; from the degree of this deflection the mass of the nucleus could be calculated with great accuracy. The chemical nature of the gases that make up a comet could be established more completely than it can be done from observations from the ground.

And then there is a problem left over from the nineteenth century, when French, German and Russian astronomers gave it a great deal of thought and attention. Astronomical books, then as now, said that comets were visible by reflected sunlight. But when these observers tried to establish the luminosity of a comet, they repeatedly found that a comet emitted more light than could be accounted for by mere reflection of sunlight. Some guessed that chemical reactions in the coma and tail produced this extra luminosity. Others said that it was more likely to be electrical in nature. The problem of the extra luminosity was never solved; it was slowly forgotten. The general

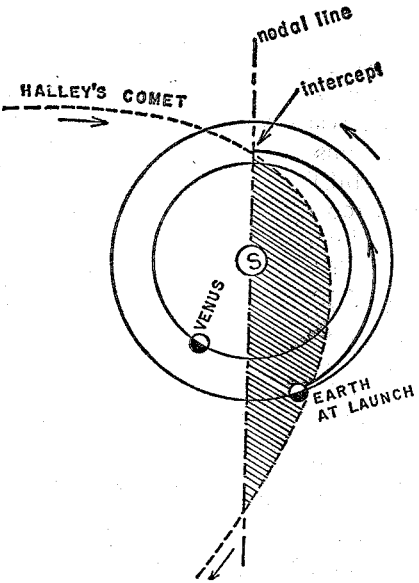

Fig. 3. The portion of the orbit of Halley's comet near its perihelion. The "nodal line" is the line connecting the two points where the comet's orbit goes through the ecliptic.

lack of bright comets during the twentieth century probably contributed to the lack of interest. True, the observers of the nineteenth century did not really measure a comet's luminosity but estimated it visually with the backing of much experience. It *may* have been just a collection of mistakes, but we cannot be sure. At any event, a probe would clear this up.

While all the thinking about a suitable comet for such a

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mission was going on, several people, living thousands of miles apart and not knowing what the others were thinking, asked themselves: why not go after the big one, namely Halley's comet? It is due again in the Spring of 1986. Here we have a large comet with a reasonably well-known orbit. The uncertainties now existing about the precise date and so forth of its next approach could be established by observation a few months before the event — obviously a large comet can be observed for a longer time than a small one. But while Halley's comet is what is called an easy object for observation, it is anything but easy as a target for a probe.

This is the point where facts have to be added to the information contained in Fig. 1. The diagram shows that Halley's comet is retrograde; it moves around the sun in a direction opposite to the motion of the planets. This by itself makes life difficult, because it looks as if comet and probe must pass each other like two jets flying in opposite directions. The period during which useful measurements can be taken will be very brief indeed, even with very sophisticated instrumentation. To make it all still worse, Halley's comet has an orbit with the rather high inclination of 16°.5, so it would have to be intercepted by the probe when it passes through the ecliptic (Fig. 3.)

Let us have a few figures about its orbit now. Aphelion is beyond Neptune's orbit at a distance of 35.3 A.U. from the sun — it was passed in 1948. Orbital velocity at aphelion is about 2.33 miles per second. The perihelion is at 0.59 A.U., or between the orbits of Mercury and Venus; orbital velocity at perihelion is just a shade below 34 miles per second. The calculated time of the next perihelion passage is Wednesday, February 5, 1986, at 3:50 A.M. (EST), with an unknown factor of uncertainty at the moment. However, at its previous appearance the comet was first photographed when it was at a distance of 3.2 A.U. from the sun, 221 days prior to perihelion passage. It was seen first with the naked eye (by Prof. Max Wolf of the Koenigstuhl Observatory of the University of Heidelberg), 68 days before perihelion passage. We can expect that it will be spotted photographically at a longer distance than 3 A.U. next time, possibly as much as 10 A.U., so that there will be ample time for correcting the orbit calculations.

Because the perihelion passage is still 18 years in the future, our thinking about a probe to

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Halley's comet need not be restricted to today's rockets, today's instrumentation and today's methods of launching a space probe toward a distant target. For some time now, space experts have been talking about something they call "swing-by" or "swing-around" missions. None has been performed yet, but the principle is to utilize the gravitational field of a planet to alter the direction of a space probe to accomplish something that could not be done directly.

It so happens that the planet Saturn will be available for a swing-by maneuver when Halley's comet passes it about 900 days prior to its next perihelion passage. On a flat diagram it looks as if comet and planet will come fairly close to each other at that time; in reality, because of the high inclination of the comet's orbit, they will be far apart. But the important point is that both planet and comet will be in about the same direction in the sky as seen from the earth. If we sent a space probe to Saturn in 1973, it would get to Saturn's orbit at the right time, at a point not far from the position of the planet. Because of its inertia, the probe would overshoot the orbit of Saturn (Fig. 4), but its original fairly straight path would be bent into a large hairpin curve by the planet's gravity. If the position of the probe relative to the planet were properly chosen, the probe would make a return flight to the sun that would parallel the orbit of the comet and slowly approach it in the course of 400 days, fi-

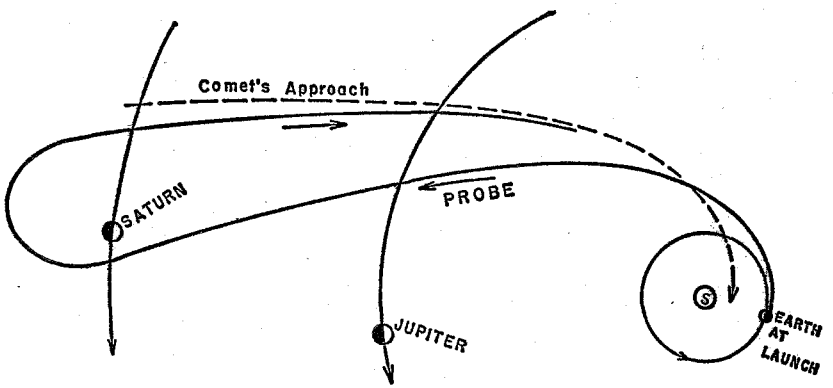

Fig. 4. A so-called swing-by mission for a probe to Halley's Comet. The swing-by is accomplished by utilizing the gravitational field of Saturn to bend the probe's orbit into the desired path.

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nally coming close enough so that a soft landing of the probe on the comet's nucleus would be a distinct possibility.

Right now, in 1968, such a mission is beyond the state of the art, except for the rocket itself. The Saturn-V, with suitable upper stages, could provide the necessary lift and velocity. The difficulties are at the electronic end; signals will have to be sent over distances so great that the signal will need up to 13½ hours to reach the probe; the return signal will, of course, take just as long. However, the probe will not have to leave until five years from now, so there is time to think and work around the difficulties.

— WILLY LEY

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

FORECAST

Next month is our eighteenth birthday, and the guests at the party include some very old friends — and some new ones.

For openers, there's a story called *The Villains from Vega IV* by Gold. Well, not exactly by Gold. It's by two Golds — H.L., who was *Galaxy's* founding editor, and E.J., who happens to be his son. Obviously genes will tell; and obviously Gene Gold's genes carry some handy literary traits.

Now that we think of it, this may be the only father-son collaboration in all of science fiction. Anybody know of another?

In the same issue Christopher Anvil gives us *Behind the Sandrat Hoax,* Kris Neville takes us to *Thyre Planet* and Mack Reynolds tells us about a *Criminal in Utopia.* Which presents a problem for his criminal. Think about it: Here you are, a bright young man with larceny in your heart, living in a society where money is just a quaint old memory from the dark ages and all transactions are handled by universal credit cards. What do you steal? How do you keep what you have stolen?

There's more of course — Willy Ley's *For Your Information,* Algis Budrys's book reviews, a "non-fact" article by Larry S. Todd called *The Warbots.* Interesting piece. It's a history of armored warfare, for the next 12,000 years, illustrated by the author himself.

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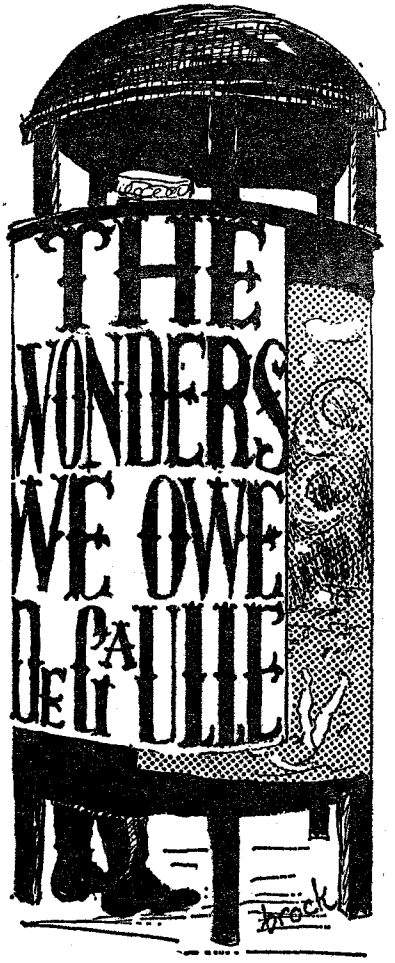

by LISE BRAUN

Come take a trip with Galaxy to the ends of the Earth — the end of the Earth as we know it!

With this issue, Galaxy's Vacation Magazine supplement takes you to some of the world's newest and most unusual travel spots in this year of 1988.

Our first stop this month will be the Sahara Desert. In search of a whipping boy, the public is blaming this on DeGaulle. Of course, le bon General did not invent the Bomb.

But he did pick the Sahara for a target area. Who wouldn't? It seemed a logical spot. How could the French scientists have known that those big dunes weren't just sand, but sand-covered cliffs; white chalk and limestone cliffs like the ones they're so enthusiastic about at Dover?

And that's all it took limestone, sand and heat of the last bomb they set off. After the dust cleared, so to speak, there they were

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with a desert that was *really* useless. Because it had cooled and annealed. Into glass.

The entire Sahara hadn't been affected — just about a thousand-mile radius reaching out from around the target site. But it couldn't be classified as a desert any more, could it? They wanted to re-name it, but as there was not exactly any precedent to guide them, the public has solved their dilemma by calling it the Sahara Glass Flats.

After the shock (and the radiation) wore off, the French thought this would be the eighth wonder of the world. *A fantastique* tourist attraction. It took just one expedition to show them how wrong they were. Tour groups through this land of glass have been discontinued until someone develops buses with foam-rubber tires that won't puncture.

You see, this is primitive glass. It's not tempered or treated with any of your modern this and thats so it won't shatter or crack or break when you drop it. They thought it would've annealed into a solid mass. But it didn't. It's stratified like most areas of rocky land are. Oh, a few of the dunes are solid — like icebergs. But that's worse yet.

The only way to go in is by helicopter. If you do go, don't forget your heavy boots, your smoke-glass sunglasses and asbestos gloves.

The boots? So you'll have feet left after walking over the glass — crunch, shatter, tinkle, crash, scrunch. And the glasses? That stuff reflects the sun. It catches it beautifully and throws it back prismatically from every angle. Then the gloves — if you think the sun heated up the sand that was there before, you should feel what it does to miles and miles of glass!

You'll have to fly in every morning and drop down by ropes. No landings. No campsites. It would make one hell of a place for a bedroll — glass splinters and slivers who knows where.

And do leave those dunes alone. It's one thing to pick-axe your way up a berg or glacier, but a *hot* iceberg? Forget it. If you so much as brush an arm or leg against the edge, presto, second-degree burns. You'd need asbestos clothing, and then you'd pass out from the heat.

But don't forget your cameras. You can fly across at different times of the day and see the whole place for the first time each time. When the sun rises, the glass is one color; when it sets, it's turned yet another.

That's the clear glass. Wait till you see the areas of colored glass.

There's one strip, about two miles long and a mile wide, of

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green glass that looks like an oasis from a chopper. There's emerald apple green and kelly and nile, chartreuse and pea and hundreds of green and blue-green variations. All it took for green glass was a little copper in the mix.

Then there are acres of crystal, chunks of it, good-sized rocks and boulders. Heavy, shimmering, captive prisms of crystal. That's glass with lead in it.

And the red glass! Patches of it all over that desert. From the air it looked like a wounded giant walked along scattering drops of blood. In some spots there are huge smears where the giant must have stopped to rest. But red glass doesn't come from blood. It comes from gold! And some of those drops of gold-bearing blood are a hundred yards across.

There's one field where the red glass mixed with the lead crystal. It's fantastic to walk through there, kicking those red prisms. There are no rubies like it in the whole world, and your cameras can't do it justice. (Provided you remember to bring all the necessary filters.)

The whole place is a psychedelic delight. Pick up one of those crystal rocks and look through it at the other glass. It's better than any artificially induced state. Except, of course, you are with your heavy boots and insulated gloves, walking crunch, scrunch over the poor fragile stuff.

There's still the question of what to do with miles of broken glass. Maybe there's a whole new industry about to spring up, a fortune waiting for someone.

All that gold waiting to be melted out. Plus the copper, and you should see the stretches of black glass! Layers of it, exotic, shiny; it looks like obsidian. That's colored with iron, and some of it might have silver in it, too. There are miles of it. Then there are the fields where the sand fused with manganese and turned purple, violet, amethyst. A sunset over these areas is unbelievable.

But forget the idea of selling the choice pieces of crystal as souvenirs. Of what? The biggest blunder anyone's made on Earth so far? Besides, if you've seen one rock made of crystal, you've seen them all. It *can* be ground and etched; it works up into beautiful paperweights, but that's all.

But how much can they dispose of this way? People collect rocks all over the globe, and I don't think they've gotten too far along in depleting the earth of its supply of rocks.

So here it sits — most of the Sahara Desert. If anyone ever figures a way to get tours in and out economically it could be a greater natural (or unnatural) wonder than the old Grand Can-

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yon was. But till they do. I'm not sure you'll want to go unless you're wild about looking at broken glass.

Maybe the French should have a contest. Send your entries in, folks, the best idea we receive for disposing of our glass wins an all-expense paid tour of the Sahara Glass Flats. Plus a lifetime supply of broken fragments. And the runners-up will get five tons of glass, their choice of color, plus the General.

Not that there's much demand for *those* any more. But be fair. After all, how could DeGaulle or anyone else have known about the deep sub-crustal fault right under that part of the Sahara? And if anyone had, who could have guessed that the seismic energies unleashed could bring about the Great Pacific Tilt?

Now let's travel back to the General's favorite country, the good old USA. Which is not as old as it used to be, now that the quakes had stopped. We're headed for the West Coast — the *new* West Coast — for a pack trip down the San Andreas Canyon.

Of course, it's a shame about the old Grand Canyon. It's still spectacular, if not as large. And the geysers and hot springs spouting up from the Colorado River make it even more interesting than before.

But so many people have seen it, and this trip is for the more adventurous. They haven't built any hotels yet — just in case the quakes start up again — so we'll be on our own. Just us and the Parks Guides.

If you've got the time, funds and intestinal fortitude, I would advise starting out at Fairbanks or Juneau and making your way down to what's left of Baja California. But from one who's done it, let me tell you that's a long trip to make on a mule's back.

The tour areas the Parks Department is setting aside include some of the finest features of the San Andreas Canyon, and they defy verbal description.

The Canyon is so new they haven't had time to blast any trails down to the floor. So our trip will start on a comic note. You haven't seen anything until you've seen a trussed-up mule being slung with ropes down to the floor of the San Andreas Canyon. Unless it's yourself undergoing the same indignity.

We'll start out from Crater Lake, which is wider now and not as deep as it used to be. The landscape was flooded, but not ruined too badly. The hotels are still here, so take advantage of them. It's the last night you will spend in bed for a while.

There's not much to say about the mechanics of the trip — jog-

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ging along on the mules, eating around campfires, sleeping on the ground in sleeping bags. Don't worry about wild animals. The only ones down here are fossilized. But I must warn you — especially the ladies — sanitary facilities do not exist!

Lest this cause undue alarm let me add that the guides are courteous and understanding. Let me also add that you needn't bother bringing your transistor radios — unless they happen to be equipped with mile-long antennas.

But the scenery *is* beautiful. If we were to compare San Andreas with the Grand Canyon, it would win hands down because of size alone, but that is only the first consideration.

The colors in the layers of uncovered rock are far more spectacular than those of the Grand Canyon. What makes them so much more interesting of course is the fact that they're new; they haven't even begun to erode. They should stay that way for a few thousand years, so you've got plenty of time to enjoy them.

The vegetation has already begun to take over. There are wild roses and buttercups, asters, daisies and even dandelions growing out of every niche they can find. In another twenty years, when the pines are tall enough, it'll be really gorgeous. For now there's just a good enough overgrowth of weeds and grass to hide the scarred land. (And enough bushes growing up to provide necessary privacy.)

Of course, if you don't feel that you can take three whole weeks on a mule, you can climb up near Stockton and take a bus over to the town of New San Francisco. There's a Parks Dept. ferry that leaves twice a week for a tour of the ruins of the old city. There are decent accommodations on the island and if it seems a little macabre it is none the less interesting.

We'll jog along, however, past the new capital, Fresno, past Bakersfield, the present movie center, down to where Los Angeles used to be. If you're a skin-diver, you can leave the tour here and explore the underwater ruins. If you think Disneyland used to be a fun place, you should see what's it like under the sea.

Otherwise you can continue for the last two days of our trip to its finish at Mexicali. There's a short side trip to the edge of the Pacific where you can lean over the cliffs and peer sadly down at what's left of Tijuana.

Then we'll drive back to the jetport outside of Bakersfield and catch a plane which is going to take us further west, to the remains of the Far East. We're

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headed for DeGaulle's other major contribution to world tourism: New Lemuria, 4,000 miles southwest of California.

As Japan sank slowly into the sea, Lemuria began rising up. It's still not the safest spot in the world to be sure. But even New York City has been trembling lately — you remember the Pan-Am Building's fate — so you're not safe anywhere.

What did the most damage in Pacific areas, even before the last devastating earthquakes hit, were the tidal waves that were a direct result of the California quakes. The Japanese have really been extremely fortunate. Due to the many warnings their scientists were able to give them, they were able to migrate with much of their personnel and equipment in time.

They don't feel any more insecure on New Lemuria now than they did on the old land, which had been shaking for a couple of generations anyway. New Lemuria seems to be fairly stable, bar the occasional tsunami when another volcano pokes its head above sea-level.

But the UN, which still controls the islands, isn't allowing anyone on the smaller ones and the inhabitants have wisely built only in the centers. Even the fishermen live inland. When they're working they carry powerful radios on their boats so they'll be able to receive warnings in time.

The scenery here is also too new to have achieved any of the spectacular beauty that, say, Hawaii had before Mauna Loa went off. But the Hawaiians have already got orchid farms in full bloom, and their new pineapple plantations are well under way. The beaches will need a few millenia before the rocks and dirt turn to sand, but when there are no tsunamis the water is warm and blue. And they say that the surf off the new beaches at Tarawa is magnificent.

Of course there are no miles of beachfront hotels. You'll have to ride to the beach every day from one of the fine hotels inland at Waikiki. They've reconstructed the old Imperial on the main island, now called New Tokyo. They were able to salvage most of the old place. You can't tell the difference until you look out the window.

The Japanese have started landscaping the beaches, hopefully. The next tsunami will undoubtedly wash the gardens away, but they'll rebuild them and meanwhile they *are* charming.

If you'd like, you can charter a private jet to Indonesia where you'll get a bang out of what old Krakatoa's been doing. This activity has been the main cause of the tidal waves at Lemuria.

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But if you don't want to go island-hopping there's enough to be seen outside your hotel window. If you stay for two weeks you'll definitely catch a tidal wave rolling in. From the safety of your hilltop hotel, there's nothing more awesome. The tsunamis act as though they were endowed with minds of their own pounding, roaring full-speed ahead at the beaches, with the noise and velocity of a cross-country freight train. With all the fury and destruction they represent, they're the biggest attraction of Lemuria.

The second biggest attraction is also to be seen from your hotel; the mountains of Oceania. If you thought the glass dunes of the Sahara were fascinating and dangerous, wait until you see the coral-topped Oceanias. If ever a mountain range deserved the name of Razor-back Mountains, this is it!

Most of the coral is white and the peaks look from a distance like they're snow-capped. Or they *did* look like they were covered with snow — they're mostly tattle-tale gray now. The Lemurians assure me that when the spring storms come the mountain tops will be washed clean again. Visit Lemuria, folks, the only country in the world with washable mountains!

Of course, not all the islands were formed from earthquakes. Some of the atolls turned out to be the coral-covered cones of ancient volcanoes. When they rose, the lava and coral fused together and there are now coral-topped mountains whose entire slopes are shiny black obsidian.

So much for the Black and White Mountains. Our final words about New Lemuria are being written from the terrace of the Imperial, where your adventure-reporter sits sipping sake, watching the sun set on the highest peak of the Oceanias. You see, not all the coral is white. The homesick Japanese started to call this peak Mt. Fuji, but by more popular demand the name that's been put on the maps — the name for this fantastic mountain that we're watching the orange rays of the sun set on fire — is Blushing Mountain. —LISE BRAUN

YOUR POSTMASTER SUGGESTS:

Make Those FASTER Connections

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A SPECTER IS

by FRITZ LEIBER

There are only two things in life you can be sure of: Death and Texas.

—Old Texian proverb

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

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What Has Gone Before

After a nuclear world war, Texas engulfs the USA and, except for the black nations of California and Florida, dominates North America from Guatemala to a fluctuating Russo-Texan boundary in the Yukon. The Texans take a hormone which makes them 8 or more feet tall, towering above their servile Mexes, Injuns and poor whites.

For 100 years Earth's nations have banned contact with Circumluna, a self-sustaining moon-satellite, which refused to join in the Great Atomic War. It is chiefly inhabited by Russian and American scientists and engineers, along with various hippie and artistic types living in a duraplastic annex called the Sack.

When relations are resumed between Circumluna and Terra, the first Sackabond to drop down the gravity well is Christopher Crockett La Cruz, known as Scully, a young actor seeking funds to save his father's theater in the Sack by asserting a family claim to the Lost Crazy-Russian Pitchblende Mine near Yellowknife.

Scully is an 8½ foot Thin — most of his muscles are too weak to function in Terran gravity. So he wears a battery-powered titanium exoskeleton. (His jaws, fingers and toes alone are abnormally strong.) By accident he is landed in Dallas, Texas, Texas — heart of the Lone Star Continent — where he is befriended by Elmo Oilfield Earp, a garrulous minor politician.

Through Elmo he meets Governor Lamar of Texas, Texas and is innocently used by Lamar's clique in the successful assassination of President Austin of Texas.

On the same day Scully falls in love with (1) Rosa Morales, called La Cucaracha, and (2) Rachel Vachel Lamar, theater-minded daughter of the governor. The two girls induce him to join the Bent-Back Revolution, a Mex revolt against the Texans.

There is a greaser legend that one day the dread figure of Death (El Esqueleto, *or for short* Esquel) *will come striding from nowhere to lead the revolt against the gringos. With his cadaverousness, black suit and gleaming exoskeleton, Scully is a natural for the part. He enjoys portraying Death and making revolutionary speeches, but his chief reason for turning rebel is his desire to get to Amarillo Cuchillo (Texan for Yellowknife), where it is planned the "revolutionary tour" will end.*

After brushes with the Texas Rangers, the tour gets underway, led by El Toro, an amiable young Mex. With them also go the two girls; a priest, Father Francisco; Cassius Krupp Fanninowicz, an unbalanced Texo-German scien-

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tist who has a monomaniac interest in Scully's exoskeleton; and Guchu, a black Zen Buddhist, who is an agent of the Pacific Black Republic. They travel in kacks — elusive combo air-cushion and copter vehicles.

A mystery develops as to what industrial enterprise the Texans are carrying out inside certain closely guarded huge towers scattered across the land. Working in the towers are hordes of temporarily cyborged Mexes, whose memory for their work is artificially blacked out.

At Kansas City, Missouri, Texas, the revolutionary company barely escapes by river submarine from a surprise raid by the Rangers on one of their big meetings. Three days later they are encamped in an abandoned coal mine near the atomized ruins of Evansville on the Ohio River.

In the Coal Mine

"*Infierno de los diablos!*" El Toro cursed genially but seriously behind me in the silvery dark. "What are you doing up here, Esquel? Hunting for Texas owl-planes? I assure you, they will spot you first. Your exo will stand out in their radar like a metal tree."

I did not remove the borrowed binoculars from my orbits, but lowered their electronic gain best to observe the dark-and-glinting speck somewhere between my eyes and Luna's bright, crinkled border. When the almost point-tiny spangle had climbed a low mountainside and off the moon, I knew for certain it was Circumluna and the Sack in transit. I shifted my field to the stars around Luna. From the pale few I could see — so different from the multitude of the Sack's blazing nights — I recognized Taurus by the doubles around Aldebaran on one side of the moon and the Pleiades on the other. That meant that for the Sack, Terra lay at the heaven's antipodes in Scorpio, beneath my feet.

El Toro pounded lightly with his fist against my leg, just above my knee-motor. "I understand now, Esquel," he said. "It is the first night the weather has let you see the cold silver sun around which your little world revolves."

I nodded, but the point seemed to me that he couldn't possibly understand, not to any degree. For instance, my almost painful surge of relief at knowing the real date, not this grotesque Spindletop fourth, but the real date: sunth of Leo, terranth of Scorpio, lunth of Capricorn.

The scientific Circumlunans still measure time by Greenwich

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— an invisible line a quarter million miles away earthward and infinity away starward. But we Sackabonds depend primarily on the times it takes sun, earth and moon to move across one of the twelve constellations of the zodiac — sunth, terranth and lunth. Our lunth is about half an earth-hour, making our sackday about six earth-hours long, the time it takes Circumluna to orbit the moon. Twelve lunths make a sackday, ten sackdays make a terranth, twelve terranths make a sunth (earth's month), twelve sunths make a starth, our Sack name for year. It's an impossible system if you try to make it precise, but okay and highly esthetic if you've grown up with it. Who needs minutes and seconds? — except in the clutches, and then you need only speed. Besides, any good actor can count stage-seconds perfectly in his head.

Or what could El Toro know about the momentary shivering illusion of free fall I felt as I permitted myself a final glimpse of the dark sequin that was my home?

I lowered my binoculars and surveyed Terra's horizon from the low hillock where I stood: Southward, the silent Ohio River, gleaming like a black nebula; Eastward, the blackened steel and masonry stumps of Evansville thrusting up through the undergrowth; Northward, prairie; Westward, the ruined works of the abandoned coal mine which was our camp.

Rapping again above my knee, El Toro said, "Come on now, Esquel. You've tempted the Texan bull long enough, and we have a job for you."

I looked down at his swarthy, handsome face. A wide grin showed the pearls of his teeth. I envied him his chunky vigorous body that stood its full four foot ten with ease in the killing terragrav, while my eight foot six sagged in its frame. I nodded and started down through the dusk, taking short careful steps.

"You are tired, Esquel," he said. "Your exo stands straight, but sometimes you hang from it — God pardon me — like the Crucified One."

"I am neither a religious nor secular hero, not even of the dubious revolutionary breed," I told him somewhat brusquely. "In fact I spit on all such. I am just an actor working his way toward Spaceport Yellowknife. As for yokes, your cyborged countrymen must carry theirs. Mine carries me. Who is the better off? If you have to work out your somewhat grandiose sympathies — you really belong in grand opera! — light me a reefer."

I was sharp with him because

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my support bands truly were cutting me cruelly. The three days since Kansas City had marked and drained me. To a person unused even to one lunagrav, six play hob with the gut, packed into the belly like a length of limp pipe the Creator did not even bother to coil. Kansas City, Columbia, St. Louis, Carbondale — four revolutionary one-night stands without a layoff. Surely Terran actors of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century must have been a hardy breed.

Columbia. My memories of our brush with the Rangers at KC had made me shake so that my exo rattled — until I made my entrance.

St. Louis. A gargantuan, half-lived-in graveyard, its skyscrapers a cemetery of melted behemothian tombs from the Atom War. But the biggest audience yet.

Carbondale. A whistlestop, except for a host of cyborgs working in two of the gigantic tower-masked drilling rigs, from each of which a twisting trail of giant rock-laden trucks centipeded day and night, to build a wall somewhere north — Diana knows why! Or most likely she doesn't.

Along a path that zigzagged through undergrowth, El Toro and I felt our way to the ramp leading down into the shallow, worked-out coal mine. Ahead and below, a small, squat rectangle of light glowed. I sipped my stick, drinking deep of the evergreen smoke and holding it in my lungs, but although our footsteps began to syncopate, there was no soothing of pain.

El Toro said, "You draw apart from us, Esquel. You hug your hurt and loneliness. The girls in particular are distressed. I am sure that if you spoke a few gallant and sugary zeros into the ear of either — well, we have a saying that one night's sleep with is more restorative than a week's sleep without. That is, if a man can imagine the latter."

I did not tell him of Rachel's and Kookie's trick of the one interrupting us whenever I was alone with the other, nor of my determination to hold out against them both until one or the other surrendered unconditionally.

I said instead, harshly, "For me this is a business trip, not a romance, either with giddy, easily-won females or the Bent-Back Revolution, which appears to be killing a hundred Mexes for every Tex. And acting, done in professional fashion, is the most tiring business."

I unintentionally kicked a bit of gravel that clattered down the slope. Instantly a near-blinding searchbeam shot up from the depths. Around it I made out the

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blurs of armed guards. I was both reassured and irked by this evidence of revolutionary preparedness.

El Toro observed, using hand to shade his eyes from below, "It is odd to think that even Death should become weary."

"So my performances *are* falling off," I replied, quick to catch at any hint of criticism. "Soon, instead of firing your revolution, I shall be a cold rocket-tube that coughs once and dies forever, reeking of hydrazine."

"No, no, no!" he protested, a little too much. "Why, only last night I was admiring your new *chiste* — I mean, gag — of pretending a duel with Ranger Hunt and President Lamar."

We'd had certain news that Governor Lamar had been made president of Texas in a hurry-up inauguration. Rachel-Vachel had said this advancement of her Daddy meant certain doom for the Lone Star Republic. I was doubtful. Apart from his idiot involvement with his daughter and his compulsive lint-picking, Lamar had seemed to me a shrewd man and suave for a Texan.

El Toro went on eagerly, "The gag made my mind buzz. How would it be if we had two tall dummies representing *el presidente y el jefe?* Inside the empty clothes of each would be a nimble comrade moving the hated head on a pole. Besides providing extra realism, they would give the audience something to throw things at!"

"Not a bad idea," I told him, breaking it gently. From what I had seen of the marksmanship of most Mexes, they would be hitting me as often as the dummies. "*If* you can figure out a foolproof way for the men inside to see out uninterruptedly, so they don't fall off the stage. And *if* they'll follow my directions to the letter. And *if* you have foamed plastic or even papier-mache to make the heads. And *if* you have a good caricaturist sculptor." I did not mention that I was an expert at the last.

"Enough ifs!" El Toro protested. "You always drown anyone else's ideas — especially if they involve you sharing the stage with another."

I looked down at El Toro. It was the first even mildly spiteful remark I had ever heard him make. Had he caught acting in only a week? But it is a most infectious profession, and with it go its vain and gossipy habits. Besides, a star must alway expect jealousy.

"Not so," I told him mildly. "I have already suggested that the Senoritas Lamar and Morales —"

"And I have told you why that is impossible!" he shot back. "Women on the stage! Unheard

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of. Oh, in the comic or erotic perhaps, but this is serious revolutionary drama!"

"Serious revolutionary farce," I corrected. "Also, there is one fatal objection to your excellent idea. The dummies of Lamar and Hunt would have to wield swords back at me, else it would be only cruel slaughter."

"But my people enjoy cruel slaughter. Consider the bullfight."

"The bull has horns," I reminded him.

"Nevertheless I could manage it. Observe!" he retorted, striking a position. "With my left hand I hold the headed pole upright, so," he continued with great earnestness. "With my upstretched right I manage my sword, which is lashed to the end of a pole. While my eyes peer through a large one-way transparent window in the middle of Lamar's robe. Hunt could be played by El Tacito," he added, mentioning a Mex who acted as my bodyguard, though tonight I had eluded him.

Someone laughed — Guchu, it was — and I was myself hard-put to avoid grinning at the image of El Toro as the working mechanism of a giant puppet. We were now past the guards and searchlight, which had been turned off, and in a vast gallery of the mine, so low I had to duck a little, and dotted with massive crunch-ended posts of ancient wood supporting spooky megatons of solidity.

"You mentioned a job for me," I reminded El Toro.

The acting-light died in his eyes. He pointed at two stringily muscular bent-backs, one old, one older, crouching by Guchu and regarding me with considerable apprehension.

He said, "Here are two who have worked in the great towers which you — and we too — want to know about. Perhaps you will try your hypnotic skills on them, as you did on Pedro Ramirez."

I moved toward them, curving my lips in a friendly smile. I noted, in the ears of both, the callosities of the cyborged. Their ragged clothing revealed many burn-scars — some pale and stretched, others lumpy and twisting.

Death is not the ideal figure for a hypnotist, though he eventually summons each of us offstage with a mesmeric command. Few find his presence sympathetic or reassuring.

I got the old man under, but I was unable to get past the block on his memories of the work he did in the towers, except that he began barely audibly droning an unintelligible chant in the same rhythm as the two "dig and delve" lines I had got out of Pedro Ramirez. He kept it up faint-

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ly even when I told him to sleep.

Perhaps the older man, being closer to Death himself, was not so intimidated by me. Perhaps he even felt a certain curiosity. At any rate, he eyed me bravely and when I questioned him about his work in the great towers, his mouth eagerly formed words.

But no sounds accompanied them, and none of us, including El Toro, could lip-read them.

I had broken the block for his upper-speaking parts, but not for his vocal cords and lungs, perhaps because of a literal interpretation on the part of his unconscious mind of some prior hypnotic command such as "keep silent." He could form words, because he wanted to, but he could not make a noise.

Then I had an inspiration. I quietly said to him, "When I say, 'Go,' Federico, do the things you would do on a working day in one of the great towers. Perform each action fully, but move on to the next action when I say, 'Next.' Begin at the doorway to the tower. Go!"

He got to his feet, his bent spine more noticeable now, the muscles of his torso and legs stiffening a little as if from the weight of the yoke, and he took three steps in a straight line.

"Next," I said as he was making the fourth step.

Federico made a quarter turn and stopped, gazing respectfully at emptiness. Then he straddled his legs, held out to either side his arms with hands hanging limply, and opened his mouth wide. It occurred to me that he might be submitting himself to a medical examination or more likely a search.

He turned in the direction he had first been going. Guchu guiided him deftly past a post. We all followed. It was an eerie performance in the low-ceilinged, dim-lit forest of dead tree sections.

This time I said "Next," on his fifth step. He stopped and stood relaxedly, right hand lightly gripping something at shoulder level. At first I thought it a tool, then as he made no further movement, except to sag apathetically, I decided that it was a support by which he steadied himself.

Yet he *was* making other movements — tiny squirmings and hunching, as if accommodating himself to other beings moving past and next to him.

Gradually his legs pressed together and his elbows close to his sides — the imaginary support was almost *at* his shoulder now. I saw him as one of a tight-packed crowd of beings. Texomex cyborgs like himself, I presumed. I could almost hallucinate them, so strong was the illusion.

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Without warning he straightened up, his neck stretched, and his head was thrown back a little. At the same time he stood almost on tiptoe. And yet he seemed to exert no muscular effort to do all of this, or somehow the effort was cleverly masked. Truly the body's memory can do wonderful, perhaps miraculous things under hypnotic suggestion. It can create illusions.

I knew what the illusion was at once, for I know free fall when I see it. Inside the great tower his imagination had recreated, Federico was falling — and almost certainly with a group of others in an elevator accelerating downward swiftly. Probably almost at a terragrav, for the illusion was strong that he almost floated, right hand loosely linked around invisible grip.

I realized I did not know how long he had been falling, and I was pleased to see an associate of El Toro, one Carlos Mendoza, holding a wristwatch between himself and Federico.

Suddenly Federico's feet were flat on the ground, his knees bent, the extensor muscles of his legs bulged. His free arm clapped across his guts, his other dragged heavily on the imaginary support. His jaws — his whole face — clenched together.

It was all over in not much more than a second, yet I think all of us winced with him at the strain of that illusionary deceleration.

"A mile and a quarter," Carlos Mendoza announced softly.

I looked a question at this *comarado* I hardly knew.

"That he fell," Mendoza replied. "Or his cage."

Meanwhile Federico was nonchalantly marching again. When I said, "Next," he lightly gripped another support and sagged.

The whole pantomime of rapid descent and sudden deceleration was repeated. This time I remembered to stage-count. The fall took 20 seconds. That worked out to a distance of two kilometers, I calculated, dredging from the depths of my boring physics instruction the formula of distance equals one-half times six lunagravs (one decameter) multiplied by time in seconds squared.

"Again a mile and a quarter," Mendoza whispered, agreeing well enough with my calculation.

Once more Federico marched, grasped, and fell for twenty seconds. This time his face and body broke out in sweat, and he gasped for breath.

"It becomes hot three and three-quarters miles underground," Mendoza said tersely.

Or six kilometers, I thought, translating. I frankly felt frightened at the thought of penetrat-

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ing so far into solidity. What it implied about the vast solid mass of Earth horrified me, as it would anyone knowing only life in free fall. At last the blank datum, "Earth has a diameter of almost thirteen thousand kilometers" became terrifyingly real to me.

This time old Federico showed a new behavior. Crouching, he lowered his hands and lifted slowly one foot, then the other. Next his hands gripped something and moved slowly upward. Clearly he was drawing on a heavy suit of some sort. One could see his arms working into gloved sleeves. Next there was pantomimed zipping. Finally he lifted something invisible onto his head.

"It is like a spacesuit," I whispered.

His breathing changed. He inhaled through tinily puckered lips, exhaled through his nostrils.

"And the suit is refrigerated," Mendoza whispered beside me.

I caught his point. Old Federico had stopped sweating. The beads were evaporating.

I waited with interest. Now we would see the actions involved in his underground work and perhaps be able to interpret its nature.

He marched until I said, "Next," then grasped an invisible handhold and again dropped two kilometers.

And again and again and again, taking him fourteen kilometers below the surface of the Earth! And each time he dropped, he seemed almost to float.

We all watched with intense, even horrified interest. Nearby the intent faces of El Toro, Guchu, Mendoza, El Tacito and a couple more. I was sure each was pale under his shade of brown. Farther off, Rachel Vachel, La Cucaracha and Fanninowicz with his guards. Only the German's expression jarred — he wore a sneer of incredulity and contempt.

I suppose that for an outsider my having the appearance of a tall and stooping Death might have added to the eldritch atmosphere.

The other old Mex, still in hypnotic sleep, continued his rhythmic drone. That was the only sound.

Environment added to the horror. That we should be in a dim-lit, oppressively low-ceilinged coal mine, its great close-set pillars marked by the strain of the weight they bore — all these things intensified the horror of the thought of a mine going already one hundred times as deep.

And yet it was all in the kingdom of the imagination! We half dozen amateur actors (including one thoroughgoing professional) were witnessing a pantomime, based only on muscular and phy-

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siological memory, which created an illusion far more gripping than any of us could have managed — perhaps even I!

Federico repeated the drop eighteen more times — until by my calculation he was forty kilometers below Terra's surface, which agreed well enough with Mendoza's twenty-five miles.

"*Madre de Dios!*" the latter exclaimed softly. "That is the thickness given for earth's crust. He must be near the molten mantle."

At last Federico changed his act. Hoisting up a heavy something, he directed it downward between his feet. Bracing his forearms against his belly and hips, he began to shake in a taut violent way, so that his hard sandals beat a tattoo against the rock floor.

As if that sound had been a signal, the other old Mex's drone became louder and changed into execrably pronounced and accented English words, which it took me three or four repetitions wholly to understand:

Every day, two hours times twelve,
A million yokemen dig and delve.
In your earplugs comes the boss's yell,
"You'll keep on drilling 'til you get to Hell."
So drill, you yokemen, drill!
Drill, you cyborgs, drill!
It's drill blacked out in heat and pain
For your women and rum and mary jane!
And blast! And fire!

As I was listening, hypnotized myself, to the fifth repetition of that eerie chant, old Federico swayed, stopped shaking, paled, swayed again and collapsed on the rock before any of us could catch him.

Perhaps the weirdest thing for me was that, as I swiftly moved to stoop beside him, I made a point of stepping over the drill that wasn't there.

We assured ourselves that Federico was suffering from no more than exhaustion. I brought both him and the chanting Mex out of their trances. We saw them comfortably at rest.

And then we talked.

"*Hombre!*" El Toro asked for us. "What can the Texans be wanting with mines twenty-five miles deep?"

"Gold and silver," El Tacito suggested romantically, for once belying his name of The Silent One. "Diamonds big as kacks."

"They seem to be on the verge of creating artificial volcanoes," Mendoza said soberly. "But why, I ask, why?"

La Cucaracha said excitedly,

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"Texans already have big winds, big heats, big colds, tornadoes, floods, hurricanes, tidal waves. Now they want volcanoes and earthquakes too. *Everything* big."

I could agree with her on the last. The whole thing seemed like delirium. But then I had always felt horror at the thought of the innards of planets, the lair of gravity.

Rachel Vachel said, "I wish I'd spied on this more while I was with Daddy."

Guchu suggested, "Maybe they building a Doomsday Machine. Gonna stuff those deep holes with H bombs. If they start losing to Russia or China, or the mood hits 'em, they blow up all Texas like one Alamo. Maybe blow up the world. 'Taking your enemies with you,' I think it's called."

El Toro extended a menacing arm at Fanninowicz. "You should know about them," he asserted. "What is their purpose?"

The German laughed harshly. "I do indeed. What you call the great towers merely house bigger drilling rigs, designed to probe for petroleum at depths of ten to twenty kilometers. Oil is being found in rock hitherto thought azoic. But this notion of great mines forty kilometers deep is nonsense. They would collapse from the pressures. And can you imagine anyone using a hand-drill, even in a refrigerated suit, at temperatures of 1800 to 2000 degrees Fahrenheit? Ridiculous! No, my dear sirs, you have let yourselves be deceived by an amateur hypnotist and a subject who kept on repeating an action that impressed you. While your theorizations are all laughable."

I could tell from El Toro's expression that he was mightily tempted to use force on the exasperating Teuton, but persuaded from it because of the latter's usefulness in regard to my exoskeleton and other mechanical matters. Besides, I believe we were all impressed by his logic. Germans are most convincing maniacs. There had already begun to seem something fabulous in the ideas Federico's behavior had generated.

My only thought was what an unesthetic clot — worse than a Circumlunan! — the professor was, not to have appreciated the theatric grandeur of Federico's — and my — performance.

To tell the truth, I wasn't having many thoughts by then. I was too tired. In fact, I was more than tired. Supervising Federico's performance had taken me out of myself, but now I was feeling nothing but terragrav's horrible drag, as if I were perpetually in the agony of sudden deceleration Federico had portrayed at the end

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of each of his two-kilometer drops.

Rachel Vachel and La Cucaracha smiled at me side by side, inviting me to gossip with them, but threesome, not twosome. I was having none of that.

Signing to El Tacito, I walked to my quarters and was asleep before my headbasket thudded softly into my pillow.

Slumstorming

The next two days I continued weary of body, heavy of mind, empty of emotion. Old Federico's pantomime, in fact the whole coal-mine episode, seemed more a haunting, heavy-hued nightmare than a reality.

The Ohio Valley turned out to be a miserable region. The general population has more short than tall Texans, and *some of the former are in the Revolution.* Poor whites. They are refused the hormone because they don't make enough money to support the extra poundage that goes with greater height. They say they don't want the hormone. Sour grapes in most cases, I think. Some of them are dwarfed enough to go through Mex doors, though the law forbids that. Most Mexes accept them as fellow revolutionaries, though it frightens me to think how they must increase our security risks.

The cities are as dwarfed as the people — ragged rings around atom-glazed wastes on which new building has only recently begun.

I have taken to writing another new script to fill in time. Our show must somehow be improved. For instance, El Toro thinks he is learning acting from me, but is doing worse than when I began teaching him.

The first night we gave a rotten performance in Louisville. The second, a worse one in Cincinnati. Even I was lousy, both shouting and turning a silent back on audience to get their attention. At the end they filed out silently. I doubt we sparked a single street-corner disturbance. I know who was at fault — me. But an actor cannot play a role like Death night after night without emotional fuel.

Accordingly I waited until Rachel and Rosa were together and then somewhat somberly invited them to my brick cabin in our quarters in a deserted motel beside a rusty-fenced freeway crossed by great gullies.

I waited until they were comfortably seated, had lit up, and were gazing at me curiously.

Then, ad-libbing all the way,

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for I had resolutely planned no set speech, I poured out my feelings to them.

I described the vast loneliness of a freefall being on a gravity planet and in a strange culture. I explained the desolation of an actor playing a big role, especially an anti-human one such as Death. I revealed my petty foibles and childish self-pity.

In short, I spoke nothing but the truth. It was a great relief to me and it almost broke me up. But not quite. An actor remains an actor.

Next I praised them both lavishly, telling them how I couldn't have made it without their imaginative help and comfort. I hinted at my further emotional and physiological needs. I ended by assuring them that I loved both of them greatly — and equally.

Only then did I remember that I had told them exactly the same thing in the church and they had both called me crazy.

This time they were kinder. Perhaps. Rosa patted my knee and said, "Poor bones-man. I am *muy simpatico.*"

"Yeah, it's sure tough on you, Scully," Rachel agreed, patting my other knee. "But now let's get down to this bigamy thing you're trying to set up, if I read you right," she went on. "Which of us girls comes first?"

"Indeed yes," Rosa seconded, crossing her arms and beginning to tap the floor with the toe of her slipper.

"That is for you to decide," I answered, not loftily, but with great simplicity and sincerity. Then I crossed my arms.

"Sure you really don't like one of us more than the other?" Rachel asked. "And are trying to be kind to the loser?"

"Kind!" Rosa spat.

"No!" I said and then went on to explain how various forms of polygamy, from the linear to the complex marriage, are found in the Sack. Likewise for love affairs.

"Well, that may work up in the sky," Rachel responded when I paused for breath, "but down here we're not used to it."

"Indeed no!" Rosa agreed. "I have no intention whatever of becoming a 'sociable secretary' to you, *amado.* My heart is involved."

"Goes for me too, Scully dear," Rachel echoed with a sigh. "I'm too serious about you, see, to play around. Sure the balance don't teeter just a little bit more one way than the other?"

I did not trust myself to speak.

"Well then that's that," Rachel said. She looked at Rosa. "Shall I tell him, Miss Morales?"

"Yes, you tell him, Miss Lamar!"

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"Well, Scully," Rachel began, leaning forward a little, elbows on knees, while Rosa sat up straight, "us girls figured you might conceivably take that insane attitude, and so we worked out our answer beforehand. Which is: you got to decide which one of us you want, and then speak out in the presence of both of us, so there's no chance for tricks."

"But don't you see what you're demanding of me?" I burst out. "You're asking me to insult one of you unforgivably!"

"That one'll be able to take it," Rachel replied serenely. "You see, Scully darling, Miss Morales and I have come to understand each other on this tour, because of our mutual admiration of and attachment to you."

"*Si, querido!*" Rosa put in almost excitedly. "Whatever happens, whichever one of us you choose, you have created a friendship between us which can never be broken. We who were as cat and dog, are now as lamb and lamb. You can always pride yourself on that, *amado*."

"But don't you see that makes a threesome even more workable?" I demanded somewhat bewilderedly.

"No, dearest," Rachel said with great conviction.

Rosa said sharply, "Our undying friendship — you have that already. But as for love, it must be one, or the other, never both!"

"Yeah, Scully, you got to make up your mind. It's the only way you'll ever have either of us."

Once more I could only trust myself to shake my head. This time I added an unrehearsed shudder — at the insanity of their behavior, at the torment to my own feelings, at the merciless perversity of the universe.

"Scully!" Rachel asked with sudden concern. "Have you really got that gravity sickness? We get to thinking of you as tireless and superior to all mortal ills, because you're the star and work by electricity. Haven't let your batteries run low?"

"I know what!" Rosa said with certainty. "The bees-bonnet has been sleeping in his skeleton!"

"And what if I have?" I growled back at her. "We're revolutionaries. We've got to be ready for emergencies. Weapons close at hand. Skeleton — on!"

"You should have told us! We would have nursed you. We still will."

"Yeah, Scully, Rosa'n I'll be only too happy to help you off with your skeleton and tuck you in for the night, and help you on with it in the morning. And any other little thing you need. Worked fine back in the cave."

Maybe then I made my big mistake. If I had gone along

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with their gag, one or the other would have been irresistibly tempted by my helplessness. Maybe.

But I had no intention of finger-crawling across any more patio floors. Even ones carpeted with ermine.

"I do not want either of you as a nurse," I decreed. "Or both of you, for that matter. My wants run in entirely different directions."

Rachel nodded sadly. "Well, I guess he's given us our walking papers, Rosa."

La Cucaracha agreed with an emphatic nod and with an upward look at a universe apparently as perversely incomprehensible as my own.

"But let's not make it so much like a funeral," Rachel said.

"No, to a bones-man that would be far too cruel," Rosa agreed.

"Let's pass around a good-by reefer," Rachel suggested. "Rosa?"

So, mostly in silence, we smoked a long stick of grass together, and then another. It was a gesture for which I was deeply grateful. It calmed my ruffled nerves and vanity. A little.

But contrary to many stories, the mild drug does not result in libidinous orgies, except for those who greatly desire such. So when I had taken the last sip and punched out the tiny butt of a third, the girls rose and I lifted a hand in somber farewell.

In the doorway they turned. Rachel said, "Scully, I'm sure I speak for both of us when I say that it's a rare privilege to work in the same company with a great actor such as you. We also think you're doing more for the revolution than anyone since Pancho Villa and Zapata and Cesar Chavez. We know the little things you're doing, too. The voice lessons you're giving Toro, though we'll never mention them. The way you put up with Father Francisco and play along with Guchu and humor that maniac Fanninowicz. And — jokes about electric skeletons aside — the way you're plumb knocking yourself out to do everything you can for the show."

"But in that case surely —?" I left the question unfinished while I looked at them in naked yearning.

They slowly shook their heads and softly closed the door.

It stayed closed.

It was still closed when the first glow of dawn glinted from cobwebs and dust-grains on the windows.

The dawn-glow also showed me my hideous visage in a mirror appropriately spotted brown with age.

I decided I was through with *all* women.

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Yes I was. Perhaps forever. Even Idris McIllwraith.

If she had loved me even a little, she would have come to me across the cold quarter-million miles, by flower-powered self-teleportation.

Things always change. And infallibly, thank Diana, they change for the better when they're at the worst. On the next day, Spindletop eighth, we gave a great show at Indianapolis. I could have taken ten curtain calls, but Death is humble, Death is the friend of every man, his comrade throughout life, reminding him to waste no moment but live to the full. And if man has any comrade at all when life is ended, that comrade is Death.

After our flop in Cincinnati, the Committee had seen reason and given me a free hand with my new script and the cast, making me director.

Results: Father Francisco, wearing chest mike, was audible at last as he spoke his modernized, punchy prayers.

Guchu stayed in the spotlight, and his psychedelic ravings all led to good revolutionary conclusions. He was an impressive figure, symbolically bringing to the Revolution the mighty support of Africa (his race) and Asia (his religion).

Rachel had at last a short but effective part as Wife of Death, reminding me as I go off to work on Earth to take good care of my health, avoid chills, get enough to eat and so on. She wore a skin-tight black suit with wide silver seams on the outside of her arms and legs to indicate bones. Other silver lines followed exactly her lower ribs, but went into whorls around her breasts. She had a narrow silver spine, girdle and collar bones. Over this she wore a black cloak, while her platinum hair was tightly braided and coiled to suggest a helmet.

El Toro's oration was topped by a shorter but snappier one by Rosa. I knew that girl had talent! She wore a red Phrygian freedom cap, from under which her dark hair flowed; red boots; and a short red dress on which were scattered in black the Isis cross and a symbol I did not know: a circle with a three-armed Y in it.

Then, while El Toro sang the old version of *La Cucaracha,* with its homely references to cockroaches, marijuana and the Mexican revolutionary tradition, Rosa did a still snappier dance. Next: El Toro went into *La Muerta Alta.* I returned to stage with Rachel, and soon we had the whole audience standing and singing with us.

If our audience didn't rush out to riot, at least they departed in a

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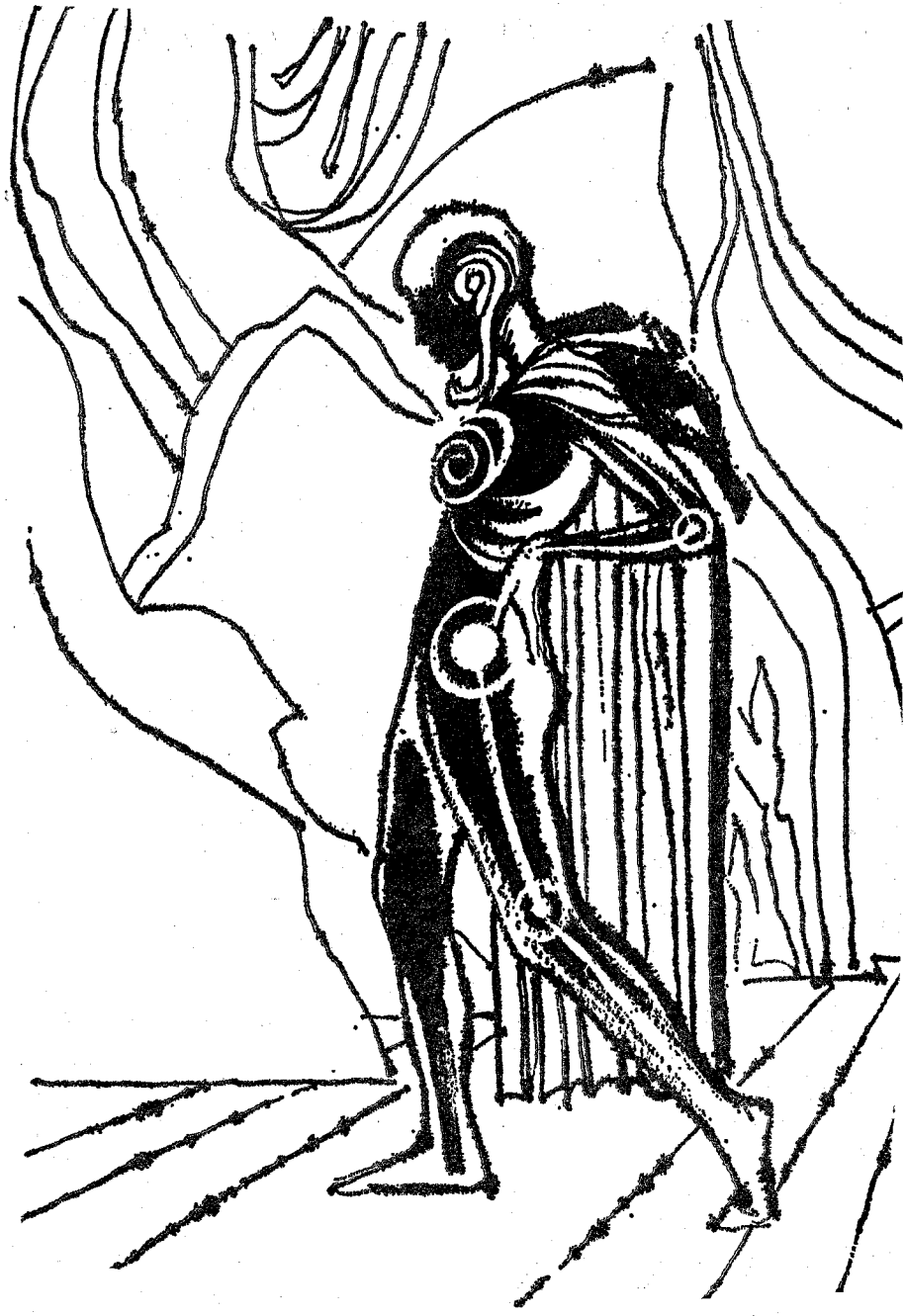

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cocky mood, suffused with revolutionary enthusiasm, ready to assert themselves and use their wits, determined to take no crap from anyone.

Later El Toro, who has a good if untrained singing voice, asked me to give him lessons in grand opera. Why not?

Of course, I was careful to make Rosa's and Rachel's parts equal and keep my relationship with them coolly professional.

Father Francisco and El Toro rationalized the girls being in the show by explaining to me that this far north there is a weakening of the Latin prejudices. True enough, there were as many short Texans and "stay-behind" blacks in the audience as Mexes.

There were reports by A.M. revolutionary radio of big Ranger raids in Columbus, Cleveland, Pittsburgh. We had dodged back west just in time.

Next night we had another smasheroo. It was in Chicago, a largely new yet big city situated west of Chicago Bay, where devastation bombing let in the waters of Lake Michigan and where rust-boned, melted, still-radioactive skyscrapers dream deep below.

Flying up to Chicago in our kack, I noted, in its transparent plastic, small stamped medallions, the print on which had been obliterated. I found one the file had missed and saw the familiar Cyrillic characters spelling out "Novy Moskva, C.C.C.P." For a moment I thought I was back in Circumluna, which remains stubbornly bi-lingual.

Guchu readily admitted the kack had been manufactured in Russia and only passed along by the Black Republic to the Revolution. "We're not up to those technologies, and neither is the Florida Democracy," he told me. "And we don't want to be. Outside of atoms to desalt our water and give us electricity, we operate by flower-power. We don't have a big population. The unfit die young. What protects us from the Texans is the deserts and mountains, the free Injuns and Afro-Russian aid, chiefly in atoms, which are getting hard to come by — the fissionable and fusionable ones, I mean."

Novy Moskva — New Moscow — is near Lake Baikal, he tells me. Siberia has become the Russian "Texas."

I was lying down at the time and also downwind of the other passengers, so far as the uncertain drafts inside the kack permitted.

I log as much horizontal time as I can. I am troubled by heart palpitations, splitting headaches, diarrhea and varicose veins. Lying down distributes the gravity

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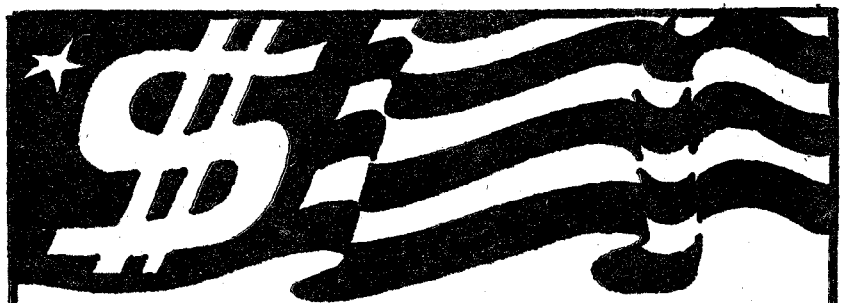

One thing I'll say for labour [the British Labor Party], and that is that it isn't as offensive as the corresponding mutatory force which now threatens culture in America. I refer to the force of *business* as a dominating motive in life, and a persistent absorber of the strongest creative energies of the American people. This intensive commercialism is a force more basically dangerous and anti-cultural than labour ever has been, and threatens to build up an arrogant fabric which it will be very hard to overthrow or modify with Civilized ideas.

—H. P. Lovecraft, 1929

strain which abets, I believe, all these symptoms. The last time I unzipped my tights from calf and ankle, I was sickened by the purple varicosities, which grew larger as I watched. Since then I have not opened my tights except minimally for sanitary reasons, and even then I glimpse a varicosity of the superficial femoral vein.

To tell the truth, I have not been out of my carefully-mended sack suit and also my exo-skeleton — Rosa guessed right — since they raided us in Kansas City. So I have not had a complete bath for well over a week. So I stink and keep away from people, or at least downwind, when I can.

I also have taken to rum, with which El Tacito, my bodyguard, supplies me. I intentionally spill some of the rum on me, but I drink as much as I can carry too. It is a good analgesic as well as an acceptable male perfume.

I refuse to take off my exo-skeleton partly from resentment — at the girls, Fanninowicz, all of them — but chiefly from sheer panic fear. I know the support bands are producing rashes and small hemorrhages, chiefly subcutaneous. But I cannot bear the thought of the helplessness I experienced in the patio. I am haunted by dreams of the Rangers finding me away from my lively titanium bones.

Or perhaps it is simpler. Per-

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haps I am just afraid of gravity, as men once were of "empty space."

I have also developed — from the soupy atmosphere, I should think — a deep, hacking cough, which I can barely control on stage. The rum helps that a little, too.

Thinking such thoughts as we took off from Chicago, I drifted into a horror dream. I was trapped amidst the crushed and dying in a crumpled subway car in a collapsed tunnel in Old Chicago. I struggled helpless for an eternity. Then the boiling water rushed in and seared me awake. A dream? A gravity nightmare? I know nothing of subways, but I suppose I may have run across them in history study-materials. But how could I see crumpled advertisements so clearly? Atomin, the Pain-Reliever that Penetrates Your Every Molecule. Coca-Cola. Kurb Kinky Kurls. Prepare Yourself for the Future with LaSalle Extension Courses. Double Your Pleasure, Double Your Fun, With Doublemint, Doublemint, Doublemint Gum.

Moonlight showed choppy whitecaps in black water below as we raced north across Chicago Bay.

Later I had chills and thought I was getting a fever. The explanation was much simpler, one I knew but had not kept in mind. On Terra it gets colder as one moves toward either pole.

After we played Milwaukee and Minneapolis, where we camped in an old hotel, it became clear that I must change to my winter clothes. I swore El Toro and El Tacito to secrecy and had them give me a bath. I did not permit them to remove my sack suit until I was in the hot water, with thought that its pressure might work somewhat as that of the suit, controlling varicosities. Being out of my exo produced in me spasms of fear hard to conceal.

When they saw the shape I was in, El Toro exclaimed, "*Madre de Dios!*" El Tacito, true to his name, permitted himself only a grudgingly sympathetic grunt.

I directed my gentle but thorough soaping, rinsing and drying. El Toro wanted to call in a doctor — and also Fanninowicz! — but I reminded him of his oath. After my various surfaces had been powdered, salved antiseptically and analgesically, and most smoothly bandaged, they eased me into my cold-weather suit, which is black and very like the other, but thicker, and containing a spiderweb of heating elements working off my batteries. Also it has a hood snugly covering my skull, neck and chin. Mask and gloves are available. The two Mexes helped me into my exo-

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skeleton, and I lay down to rest.

I thanked and dismissed them. But El Toro persuaded me to take a slug of rum, poured a glass for himself, and stayed behind.

"What do *you* think of our Revolution?" he asked me.

"I am earning my ticket to Amarillo Cuchillo," I replied, not at all inclined to bandy either platitudes or deep thoughts. I was relieved that I stank no more and that I felt less surface pain, but the bath had exhausted me.

He nodded. "There have been risings everywhere, even to the north. The news of *El Esqueleto* has gone ahead of us." Yet he did not sound enthusiastic.

"Many dead bent-backs?" I asked.

He grimaced.

"And in Texas, Texas, the Revolution has been crushed?"

He said, "Badly battered, though not extinct. It has not been conquered, but it has been countered. The Texans have pacified many of my people with shorter working hours for the cyborged, with more fiestas and bullfights, with free rum and Coca-Cola and with free reefers. But I asked you what *you* thought of our Revolution?"

I finally answered, "I believe it is necessary, but that does not mean I enjoy it."

"*Yo comprendo, camarada,*" he said and left me alone.

With Winnipeg, Texas, we arrived in an area where tall Texans are a tiny elite: managers, engineers, foremen, the police, the Rangers, and their wives and sometimes their children. The few short Texans are all embittered Canadians — they remember and use that name, though it is forbidden.

The numerous Mexes there are all cyborged workers — miners and farmhands and lumberjacks — shipped north with their cooks and women.

Our meeting — I can hardly call it a show — was held in a supposedly forgotten atomic shelter, which the Mexes reached by a short tunnel from one of their compounds and which we entered by a longer tunnel, part of a disused drainage system. I had to go stooping, looking I suppose like a huge black bug. At the meeting there was little laughter. There was much hate. Midway there was a raid, and all but one of us actors escaped because our entrance tunnel had not been known to the Rangers. I do not know what casualties our audience suffered.

Now our chief is Carlos Mendoza, whom I hardly know. And I am no longer giving grand opera lessons. Next time I shall not be the first man to run — at least, such is my present boast. El Toro bought it.

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Our next stop, on Spindletop 17th, was Victory, Texas, once Saskatoon, but renamed when the Rangers routed an Anglo-Russian army in the Battle of Saskatchewan. We held our meeting by a windbreak in the wheat fields.

Here the Mexes live in a shack city. No need for fenced compounds. Where could they run?

Tall Texan elite smaller, but tougher. No women or children. The deeply-hated engineers and cyborg foremen. The Rangers.

Almost no short Texans, but some Indians, who do not cyborg well. They generally take their lives after their first experience of the yoke.

Mendoza, who is something of a book-man, told me that one reason this area has remained uncolonized and unexploited, except for wheat and wood and ores, is the growing world shortage of high-grade radioactives. Earth's oil is almost gone, her remaining coal hard to come by, while the Atomic War actually increased Terran man's dependency on nuclear power. Even our kack, for example, is powered by atomic batteries.

Fanninowicz heard Mendoza's little lecture and favored him with a contemptuous and knowing grin. Typical German arrogance only?

Two days after Victory, we arrived at Fort Johnson, Alberta, Texas. Once Ft. Murray. Much like Victory, except timbering again replaces wheat-farming, and the Indians are more numerous. Here, I was told, is stationed a company of Rangers with a red dress uniform, survival from the fabulous Canadian Mounties.

The only uniforms, however, which I saw — from a safe distance, using electro-binoculars — were white fatigues. Toward evening I discovered the reason for them — camouflage. Snow fell and everything turned bright white.

Terra's weird natural phenomena still rouse in me a sense of wonder, despite my punished body and wearying mind. In the long silvery twilight, the flakes were like a ghostly Milky Way falling past a wheeling spaceship.

I donned my gloves and mask. The latter, with its silver arabesques, makes me look like Death the Witchdoctor.

Through the electro-binox I watched another of the huge towers, in which cyborged Mexes do their mysterious work. I recalled Federico's pantomime and the "dig and delve" chant, and I found myself shivering at being near a 40-kilometer hole up which — my childish imagination insisted — the dragon of gravity might

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crawl and come to hunt me down, suck me from any hiding place and crush me flat against him.

Not that I believed in such a hole. My mind shrank from the idea, and Fanninowicz's arguments had been telling. Still, it seemed unlikely that the Texans would be drilling for oil here, where Mendoza tells me the sedimentary layers are thin and the last glaciation has often exposed the underlying igneous rock: basalt, obsidian, feldspar, tufa, pumice, granite, pitchstone and their hideous confreres.

But if not for oil, what?

Whatever work is done in the towers, I could see that it produced much heat. This one steamed amidst the fallings snow and remained stubbornly black, like a giant finger protruding from inner earth.

The Gusher

After twilight had darkened into night we took off on what I hoped would be the last lap of my Terran hegira. Our company was reduced to one kack and its occupants. Besides Guchu and myself, there were Carlos Mendoza, El Tacito, Father Francisco, Fanninowicz and Rachel and Rosa. The other two kacks were headed south, their ultimate destination Denver. Our tour was breaking up.

The snow had stopped falling. It lay in a blanket a half meter thick on the stunted evergreen forest below.

The night was very clear, but the twinkling stars were dimmed by Luna riding low in the east and waxing again toward full. I had spent almost a month on Terra. I looked with tired longing at my mother satellite, tethering point of the Sack and Circumluna, cosmically so near and yet so far.

Luna was not the only rival to the stars. Ahead, ghostly green flames burned up toward the zenith — the northern lights, another remarkable Terran sight.

After about a half hour, Rosa noted that the stars had a third rival, a purple glow on the southern horizon, directly astern. It was not so much a point of light as a small hemispherical shining.

It appeared to originate near or at Fort Johnson. We speculated unsatisfactorily as to what it might be. A fire? Some part of the search for us? Even an atomic bomb was suggested, though that was contradicted by the steadiness of the glow. Besides, no sound or shock-wave caught up with us.

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Fanninowicz contributed to this interchange a knowing sneer.

I said, "I wonder if the glow has anything to do with the drilling tower at Fort Johnson?"

The German's sneer wavered toward a scowl.

"Grand Emperor of Mechanics," I addressed him, "are you merely contemptuous of us? Or are you carrying a secret about the great towers?"

"Secrets!" he said, the sneer back in full. "I am forced to carry thousands in this company, simply because my mind holds a vast number of matters beyond your understanding. Especially in the intellectually inclined Teuton, the directional hormone produces taller bodies. I feel no more contempt for you all than I do for chattering apes, I assure you."

I gave him up as a bad German job. I tucked away in my memory the point that the Texas growth-hormone was directional, whatever that jargon might mean. Then I incuriously watched the purple glow until our steady northward flight put it under the horizon.

My earlier symptoms of gravity sickness had been replaced with a general lassitude which could not merge unaided into rest because of the pains of my deep bruises, rashes, and varicosities.

The other passengers went to sleep. With the aid of rum, I followed them there — and found only nightmares of cyborged fiery dragons pursuing me through red-hot tunnels which by degrees melted my titanium.

When I awoke unrefreshed, sunrise was reddening the eastern horizon. El Tacito had replaced Guchu at the controls.

The snow-roofed forest below had become dwarfier.

The ground below was without any but the smallest hills. There was no sign of human occupation. Our largely transparent kack made the situation seem like a nothingness crossing a desolation. Except for my pains, I would have felt disembodied.

After we had breakfasted, each meagerly yet according to his taste, Rosa said, "May this one address you, Senor La Cruz?"

So it has come to Senor, I thought. "Most certainly, Senorita Morales," I replied.

"How do you propose to depart into the sky after we reach Amarillo Cuchillo?"

"By the way of the spaceport there," I told her. "If one of Circumluna's ships is not in, I will have to wait."

"Ah yes, the spaceport," she answered with a dubious nod. "But how do you propose to wait in Amarillo Cuchillo, which is little more than a Texan working-encampment?"

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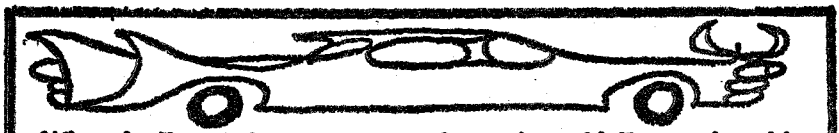

When the Twentieth Century was only ten days old, Texas ushered in with a black skyward sweep the Age of Petroleum, the era of fast cars and the big trucks that would lick the railroads, the mighty tanks and jets that would dominate subsequent wars. With a roar that was heard around the industrial world, a tumult mighty as Krakatoa's but meaningful, at the sleepy town of Beaumont, near the coast where De Soto's men had noted oil seepage three hundred and thirty-eight years before, the Discovery Well at Spindletop blew in. Within six months, the price of Beaumont land had risen a thousandfold. Oil was three cents a cask, water five cents a cup. Within sixty years, one Texan in eight was with an oil company, and one out of every seven barrels of world-oil came from Texas.

—*Texas in Brief and Big*, Houston House, Chicago, Texas

"I have counted on the help of the Revolution in this matter," I told her anxiously. "That was my understanding from our talks in Dallas."

"Ah yes," Rosa replied. "But Dallas is Dallas. And also what is said in Dallas. While Amarillo Cuchillo is another thing. Carlos, what are our contacts there?"

"Among the Cree Indians," Mendoza replied. "They are wanderers, though some live in encampment outside the town. And of course among the cyborged, but such have no station or influence. As for town-dwellers, I know of none. Perhaps—" He broke off with a sharp headshake.

I guessed that he had been about to say, "Perhaps El Toro knew, but neglected to inform me." Another matter occurred to me.

"There is also the Lost Crazy-Russian Pitchblende Mine," I said. "Though I know some of you think it a fable," I added with a glance at Rachel. "Nevertheless, my sole reason for coming to Earth was to find it and lay claim to it if I can. To achieve the latter, I had hoped to make use of well placed local revolutionaries as intermediaries. But even if there are none such, I must still make a full effort. Perhaps in making the claim, I can use my Texan disguise, which

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worked well enough for me in the Kansas City Plaza los Toros."

Rachel interrupted with, "But Senor La Cruz, how will the matter of making the claim ever come up, since we know you don't have even the map with you?"

So she was senoring me too! "I have the map *here*," I told her icily, touching my head. "That was *one* thing about Terra I memorized in complete detail while still in the Sack. If the mine exists, I can find it."

"Yes, and you may have the claim in your head too, all perfectly memorized," Rachel rejoined. "But a claim in the head isn't a document. It isn't seals and signatures."

"I carry the claim *here*," I told her, laying my hand on my chest over my heart. "And as to how I propose to assert that claim — that is my business, Senorita Lamar!"

She shrank back a little with tipped shoulder, pretending to be withered. I could have kicked her! I caught Rosa quirking a grin. There was occupation for my other foot!

Mendoza said with mild argumentativeness, "But if you truly have the claim, I do not see the need either for map or mine-hunt. A claim describes the exact location of a mine."

"This one does not," I asserted. Then before any or all could accuse me of insanity, I went on, "*However*, the original crazy Russian, who sold it to the Cree, who sold it to the Aleut, who sold it to my ancestor — that crazy Russian, whose name by the way was Nicholas Nimzovitch Nisard — he, before disappearing forever, deposited with the then-Yellowknife Registry of Mining Claims, in an envelope bearing his signature, samples of the unique mixture of pitchblende, syenite, pitchrock, and granite from his mine. On the basis of those samples, he was granted a provisional claim. If anyone can produce matching samples, plus a verifiable description of the mine's location, *plus* the provisional claim, then the claim becomes absolute."

"The Russian was crazy like a fox," Mendoza observed, nodding his head wisely. "He was afraid that the Registry, agent of capitalist government, might jump his claim."

I said, "So all I need now is your help in finding the mine. I know you carry radioactivity detectors as standard safety equipment. While this kack is the perfect vehicle in which to hunt for the landmarks of the mine: three large low outcroppings of rock forming the apexes of an equilateral triangle with sides a kilometer long. The outcroppings to north and south are of pale granite, but the one to the west is

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of darker hue — and there lies the pitchblende."

Mendoza nervously shook his head. "I fear I have not the authority to detach a revolutionary vehicle for such an individualistic enterprise."

"Is true," Rosa supported him. "The Revolution comes before all else."

Rachel said, "I think it's a mercy not to encourage Senor La Cruz in his delusions about this non-existent mine."

Kicking, I thought, is much too good for those two abominable females. However, I found myself too weary and dispirited to indulge even in sadistic fantasies. I deserve all this, I thought. To put my trust in a gang of utterly selfish traitors such as constitutes any revolutionary committee —

Fanninowicz's cackle of sardonic mirth was the final stab to the deflating balloon of my ego, flattening it completely.

However, the cold laughter was followed by a warm chuckle. Guchu, whom I had thought to be asleep, had opened his bloodshot eyes and now lifted up on an orange-robed elbow.

"Aw, give the stupid square a square deal, I say. At first I agreed with you all — we'd use him and now was the time to dump him, along with Professor Fanninowicz. But then he told his story and, man, it was so crazy that my sympathies were aroused in spite of myself! Loco Russian to a Cree Injun to an Aleut to his bombed-out ancestor! Man, oh man!" Again came the warm chuckle. "Not that we owe him anything as Senor La Cruz from the sky. First principle of being a black is that he can't ever owe an ofay anything. Ofays are a doomed breed, and its a kindness to help them along toward extinction — and that goes for you too, Miss Lamar. But taking La Cruz just as an actor — pure ham, but at least lively and hard-working — I think we owe him a little help hunting this crazy mine of his."

El Tacito looked back from the controls and nodded once.

Mendoza looked around, shrugged, and nodded too, albeit unwillingly.

I gazed at Guchu and opened my mouth to thank him.

But the words that came out were, "Thank you for nothing, you bloodthirsty black, more besotted with your race than even Fanninowicz here! I imagine the first act of your so-called Pacific republic was to slaughter every miserable white in California, giving priority to women and children."

Guchu's answering chuckle was as warm and rich as either of his earlier ones. I hadn't touched his

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ego, I hadn't got within a light-year of it.

"That's not true, Scully," he said. "Most of them we made honorary blacks."

Not trusting myself to speak to him, or so much as look at the girls, I crawled forward beside El Tacito.

"You heard what they said," I told him gruffly. "Please approach Amarillo Cuchillo on a south-north line, ten kilometers to the east. That is a trifle more than six miles."

Once again he nodded.

Except for changing the batteries of my exo, I spent the rest of the long day horizontal there, occasionally peering north — not hungrily, but with a definite though very small appetite.

After a tiny eternity, the flat blue of Great Slave Lake edged reluctantly into view. To the west I could make out low forest; to the east, the barrens.

Then for a time land retreated in all directions as we crossed the lake. To me it was as if we were crossing one of those unimaginable oceans.

The sun was low when the barrens reappeared ahead.

Guchu took over the controls.

When the barrens had been below us for half an hour, the sun was setting. Its horizontal, deep yellow light was just right to show me, a little to the west, three long shadows traveling east from the apexes of an equilateral triangle with sides about a kilometer long.

My teeth were chattering as I pointed out the miraculous sight to Guchu. I chiefly wanted him to confirm what I saw. It was impossible that I should find the mine so easily. There must be a catch somewhere.

If there was, Guchu didn't tell me. He just grunted appreciatively and swung the kack west and down.

The shadows of the two eastern outcroppings were about a half kilometer long. But that of the western one, where the mine was, seemed to stretch east forever.

I snatched up binoculars. There was indeed a catch. The long shadow was cast by one of the now-familiar huge towers.

My mine had been discovered and was being worked by the Texans.

Yet that didn't make sense. Surely the huge rigs scattered down across Texas at least as far as Dallas were not for mining surface deposits of pitchblende.

I focused more carefully and upped the magnification and electronic gain. Now I could see a great door standing open in the eastern side of the tower. Before it, figures tinier than ants were

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slowly milling about. I saw the hairline red needles of laser beams. A revolutionary rising? I wondered, pulse quickening.

I scanned west of the tower. I saw nothing whatever besides the monotonous landscape of the barrens, until there came into view the narrow, dark-gold sheen of a river, dark short dashes of two bridges crossing it, and just beyond them the huddled low buildings and narrow streets of what must be Amarillo Cuchillo.

The tops of a few of the buildings still caught sunlight. Elsewhere, twilight was gathering.

Northeast of the tiny city I spotted an airfield with two huge Texan cargo jets and a narrow shaft, its upper quarter sun-gilded, which might well be the *Tsiolkovsky* or her sister ship, the *Goddard*.

I lowered the binoculars to rest my eyes. There was shadow around me. The kack had dropped out of sight of the sun.

Without warning, Amarillo Cuchillo became the center of a spiderweb of thread-thin, ruler-straight beams of light. Some of them, red, shot up toward infinity or lanced across the barrens.

Others, green, originated in the sky or in the northwest distance, and ended around the city in incandescent points from which sparks fountained upward.

Some of the red beams ended similarly in points beyond Amarillo Cuchillo, two of them in the sky.

The kack rocked and a blinding green flare flashed across the thick plastic a foot above my head.

That convinced me that the Rangers had found us at last. Though why they had to shoot up the whole sky and landscape to down one miserable little ship of actors, I couldn't grasp. Sheer Texan exuberance, perhaps.

By the time I got my sight back, Guchu was landing the kack behind the southernmost of two eastern outcroppings. Near at hand the rocky hillock looked almost impressive — a glacier-smoothed bump of granite ten meters high.

I could see the brown furrow which the green laser beam had melted in the plastic, not quite cutting through. The furrow was barely three decimeters wide, testifying to the photonic weapon's fantastic "choke" at a distance over ten miles.

There was a soft bump and my wrists were twisting. I realized that we had touched down and that Mendoza was trying to wrench the binoculars away from me.

I saw Rachel drop recklessly down from the kack's trap to the snowy carpet below. I too was seized by the desire to know what

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was going on. Jerking the binoculars away from Mendoza, and upping my power, though not as much as I had for the duel, I followed her.

Offstage, the Revolutionary Ramblers are anything but a well disciplined company.

The snow was barely ankle deep. The wind of my movement instantly began to chill my face and hands. But I did not pause to put on gloves and mask, or even to turn up my suit's heat, until I was crouched beside Rachel on a rough granite ledge and peering over the hillock's top.

There were no more little red laser flashes from the foot of the tower, before the great door.

The earth's curvature now hid Amarillo Cuchillo, but the green and red laser beams continued their battle. I could no longer see the incandescent hits, though there were brief ghostly white glows here and there along the horizon's rim, and also long-lasting deep orange glows which I took to come from flames. Several times too I saw brief glares and later heard the distant boom of explosions, but for the most part the battle was so silent that it seemed more like one more natural display — the northern lights reduced to a weird, bright geometry — rather than a human conflict.

Somewhere along the line I had decided that the laser display was not directed at us, that I and my fellow actor-revolutionaries had merely been struck one accidental blow and become witnesses of some much larger conflict.

Though when one green ray flashed a half kilometer overhead, I flinched.

I turned up my heating a notch, put on gloves and mask and looked around me. Rachel was using my binoculars. Mendoza had found another pair and was peering through them. Rosa and Fanninowicz and Father Francisco had also come down. And El Tacito too, his pistols out, stolidly watching Fanninowicz and myself rather than the battle.

There were two battles, I remembered then. I snatched the glasses from Rachel with no more than a growled, "I want them!" in answer to her challenging, "I beg your pardon?"

I focused them carefully on the western tower a kilometer away, upped magnification and electronic gain to maximum and gradually made out the details.

Slowly I interpreted a sight that I am sure will never stop returning to me in nightmares.

The huge tower loomed darkly against the twilight sky. Facing me, two doors thirty meters high and ten wide stood open.

The inside of the tower showed

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a single great room. With one exception, the central space was empty. To either side, a purplish glow showed me sections of great tall machines. One reminded me of one of those big gantries a rocket needs on a gravity satellite.

The reason it reminded me of a gantry was that I saw, standing in the center of the tower, a gleaming violet rocket taller than the door. It must be lit by invisible banks of floodlights, I thought. I fancied it quivered, as if it were anxious for the tower's roof to lift aside, so it could take off.

By Diana! — I thought — Texas is preparing a new conquest of space. I must warn Circumluna!

"Better be ready to come a-running, children," Guchu called from behind us. "The geiger shows a little activity from the direction of the purple tower. Nothing dangerous. As of now."

Then, *through* the rocket, I dimly made out more machines behind it. I realized, at first with relief, that the rocket was only a shaft of violet light shining up like a giant laser through a hole in the floor or ground and beating against the tower's ceiling, to be reflected as the purple glow.

The purple glow, fanning out through the door showed me many bodies lying at random on the snow. Little bodies, the bodies of bent-backs. I think I saw stains beside some of them. At any rate, they did not move.

But there were many more Mexes moving about freely, seen blackly in silhouette. Some stood in groups. Others moved singly. When a group did move, there was a surge about it which I did not like. I do not know whether it reminded me of half-disciplined soldiers, or packs of animals, or what. I only know I did not like it.

Also, to one side of the door, there was what I took to be a small stack of big logs, bigger than the stems of any of the trees I had seen growing in the Land of Little Sticks.

If El Toro had been with us, he might have led us toward the tower. I only know that Carlos Mendoza did not, and that I had no desire to go there, and that I twice caught Father Francisco crossing himself.

My glasses kept going back in fascination to the violet pillar of light. I fancied that it pulsed and vibrated. It seemed a living thing. I marveled with a shudder at the Mexes moving freely in its glow, the crescent edges of their silhouetted heads like anodyzed aluminum, or mercury vapor lashed by electrons.

I wondered about the source of the violet light. A huge vat of molten metal just below the floor?

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— for there was heat there; the lengthening fan of dark ground before the door, where the snow had melted, showed that.

Or great filaments? Or a sea of thin vapor, conceivably mercury, electrically blasted into fluorescence?

Somehow I felt the source was deeper than that. I pictured a great shaft going down, and down, and down, until I felt vertigo. Federico's shaft, but with all the elevators removed and the change points smoothed out, until it was an uninterrupted 40-kilometer hole.

I lowered my glasses, blinking my smarting eyes and shaking my head to get rid of that illusion of dizziness.

I looked toward Amarillo Cuchillo. The lasers still lanced there, though I saw more greens than reds.

I was just handing my binoculars to Rachel, when I heard Mendoza, whose own binoculars were still fixed on the purple tower, give a sibilant hiss.

Ignoring Rachel's angry protests, I snatched back the glasses and put them to my eyes.

I am sometimes sorry I did so, yet it is perhaps better that I saw, than she.

Eight Mexes were returning from the violet beam. A gang of eight others rushed with that unpleasant surge toward the log stack, which seemed slightly smaller than before, hoisted a log between them, surged with it to the center of the tower and cast it into the violet light, where it was brightly and lividly visible for a moment before dropping into the hole whence the light came.

During that cinema-bright moment I saw that it was not a log, but a tall man with legs bound together and arms to his sides, a big man made bigger by the ropes swathing him from neck to ankles.

I watched that action repeated six times more, until the stack was gone. Although several attempts, which rocked me, were made to drag the binoculars away from me, I held onto them with the maximum strength of my hands and exoskeleton — held onto them and fought to keep them focused continually on the base of the violet column.

I do not think I wanted to watch. I believe I hated to. I know it tore me inside. One moment I felt like a snarling animal, next like a compassionate man, next like a maniac, next like a camera frozen in ice.

Yet I had to watch, I had to witness. I had each time to try, unsuccessfully yet desperately, to catch the expression on the face of the bound Texan falling into the brilliant hole.

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Meanwhile I was hearing a faint wailing that rose and fell irregularly. I told myself it was the wind rising. I told myself it was wolves. I told myself it was not the screaming of men, either in ultimate terror or murderous fury, or the two mixed.

Buddhists have much to say about karmic burdens and duties, karmic works and acts, karmic moments when all of the moral past of a being and perhaps the future too, is laid bare, is nakedly seized and known. That perhaps comes closest to describing what I felt and why I had to feel it. Besides, was I not Death?

The glasses slipped from my hands, I don't know to whom. I stood there a long time, with head bowed. Or perhaps it only seemed a long time.

Then among many unnoticed remarks, I heard someone, I do not recall who, say, "Yes, the cyborgs are all gone. The eight last threw something down the hole. Yes, a thing, not a man."

I looked up. The sky was dark. Toward Amarillo Cuchillo, a few lasers still lanced, all green.

I heard someone — again I do not recall who; can it have been that in my peculiar state I was hearing not voices, but meanings? — at any rate, I heard someone say matter-of-factly, "Well, the Russians have licked the Texans this time, that's for sure."

Until that moment, except for the brief period when I thought the Rangers were chasing us, I hadn't the faintest idea of who was fighting whom at the Battle of Amarillo Cuchillo.

And then I began to hear it — no, not the shrill wailing again, thank Mars! — though it was even fainter than that to begin with. It was a sound that was lilting, and rhythmic, and deep, and — one had at last to recognize — both musical and human. It was coming out of the dark, across the white waste, from the direction of Amarillo Cuchillo, and it was slowly getting stronger.

For a long while I tried to convince myself it was an illusion — perhaps something generated deep in my mind to erase those dreadful screams — but then I realized that all those around me were motionless and listening too. And then I saw the first white form appear in the dark like a ghost, small at first, but growing taller.

I heard Guchu come up behind us and begin to whisper harshly, "You all better —!"

I think he was going to say "— beat it back to the kack!" and then seeing how far the situation had developed, changed his mind.

For he finished, "— hold damn still! Tacito, dig your gun in the Professor's guts."

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By that time all the marching men had appeared from the frosty murk. There were a scant dozen of them. They were in white fatigues and they carried their lasers at the slope, or hanging farther over-shoulder with muzzle down, or casually under-arm. They all stood tall and now I could make out all the words of the march they were singing soft and low to a hauntingly familiar tune:

From the hills of Guatemala
To the frozen Arctic sea
Texas Rangers fight the battles
In the name of liberty.
We have kicked the Russki and Chinee
Until his butt is sore.
We're the Lone Star's guts and guns and fists,
We're the Texas Ranger Corps.

At first I assumed they were headed for the tower, to hunt down the revolted cyborgs. Then, with a spasm of fear, I thought they were coming for us.

It turned out they were simply marching south between us, though much nearer us than the tower. They halted less than a hundred yards away. We all held dead still indeed. With blown snow half coating us, we were hard to see. At least I hoped so.

In the lull of the wind, I heard a gruff voice say, "Wal, Custer done wuss," and another reply, "And so did Lyndon, bless 'im," and a third comment, "Yup, the mysterious east weren't never meant for human man to meddle with."

I heard nothing else coming from the northwest, but the Rangers must have, for now they scattered and knelt in a long curve, their lasers pointing back along the line of their retreat.

What came out of the northwestern murk wasn't a band of pursuing Russians, but a big long white vehicle, which moved silently across the snow, weaving like a snake.

It halted by the Rangers and I heard a hoarse voice command, "Jump aboard, boys."

They obeyed, though they didn't move as fast as the voice had demanded. Then the huge vehicle was slithering south.

I thought I heard again, very faintly, the two lines:

Texas Rangers fight the battles
In the name of Liberty!

Perhaps I should have felt contemptuous, or at least sardonic. I didn't. Something deep inside me, which I had never suspected was there, was touched.

We had started back for the kack when the roaring began. It came first through the

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rock we trod, making it vibrate and shake. We staggered and reeled.

Then the roar became deafening as the purple tower blew up. First the violet beam grew much brighter and burst through the roof, shining toward the zenith as if exultantly bound for the stars. Then great gouts of bright purple molten stuff were mixed with it. Then the walls of the tower were driven outward. In a few moments, where the tower and great machines had been, there was only a cone of bright purple, viscous, semi-solid lava, hugely squirming and swiftly growing taller.

The roaring died down, though the rock still vibrated underfoot.

Guchu yelled, "Back to the kack! The geiger's gone crazy!"

Fanninowicz broke away from the group and ran lumberingly up the hillock. El Tacito drew a bead on him. I forced down his pistol, saying, *Uno momento! Por favor!*" and took out after the German. Rachel and Rosa followed me.

Fanninowicz stopped at the summit of the rocky hummock. He was bathed in bright purple light, while we who followed him stayed in the hummock's shadow.

Shaking his fist alternately at the purple pyramid and at us, he roared out, "Yes, the dirty Russians have won a battle, but now they will lose two, ten, a hundred! With his back to the wall, Hitler created the V-1 and the V-2! Now the Texans, sole heirs of the virile Germanic spirit, have won the means to throw back and conquer the jealous world! Faced by the shortage of radioactives, they have had the the vision and daring and heavy technology to tap pockets of radioactive magma under Earth's crust! Across their great land, at every likely spot, they have with admirable secrecy created the mohole mines! The Lost Crazy-Russian Mine was the clue that led to the new Spindletop! Everywhere the ultimate gushers are coming in, as at Fort Johnson last night, though you fools had not the wit to read the meaning of that glow! They will make Texas all-powerful!" And facing the glow with fist held high, he shouted, "*Sieg Heil!*" and again, "*Sieg Heil!*"

Perhaps I should have been touched by that too. I wasn't. All I could think was that Germans were maniacs and that the grandiose Texans were giving poor old atom-scarred Terra another horse-size dose of deadly radioactivity.

Meanwhile I had grabbed Fanninowicz's ankle and jerked. He came tumbling heavily down. Rachel and I each grabbed him by a shoulder and rushed him toward the kack. When he didn't

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move fast enough, Rosa kicked him viciously from behind.

As we scrambled aboard Guchu yelled, "You dumb ofays are crazy-lucky I waited for you. Now hang on!"

The kack took off straight east, hugging the ground to get the most protection out of the hillock's low shadow. We traveled east many miles before we began the long circle north and west to find the tents of the Crees.

Zhawlty Nawsh

Fanninowicz continued euphoric in the kack. He discoursed to us like a paranoically insane schoolteacher in his grandiose phase. He sprayed spittle like my father acting Macbeth, and his voice often rose with a Iago's or Richard the Third's evil glee.

"It is a commonplace," he began, "that common men never perceive the wonders of science and technology until the rockets roar, until the nuclei give up their energy at interior solar heat, or until the rich thor-uranic lava spouts from a moñole. Now you have seen, and the secret is out. So, attend me, children."

El Tacito made as if to club him with the butt of his rifle, but Mendoza shook his head.

"It has long been known, even to oafs like you," Fanninowicz continued on without notice, "that Terra has a crust of solid rock as much as seventy kilometers thick. Below that is the mantle: three thousand kilometers of molten rock under increasingly vast pressure.

"Once it was thought that the mantle was slowly cooling and shrinking.

"But as early as the twentieth century, the preponderance of evidence indicated that the heat of the mantle was steadily maintained by cells of rich radioactives in it.

"These deep cells produced slow convection currents in the mantle, leading straight up to the crust, spreading sideways there and then descending. The Dutchman Veneg-Meinez first suggested that. Which is to say that a German first developed the theory, for despite their reputation for peacefulness, the Dutch were the ancestors of the brave and long-mourned-for Boers, which proves the Dutch to have been subconscious Prussians.

"Up the slow convection currents rode the rich radioactive ores, bit by bit. They were the hottest and most expanded of all the materials in the current, since they were the source of its heat.

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"Each current melted a dome in the solid crust above it. Some of the radioactives moved sideways with the current to its areas of descent hundreds of miles away. But others accumulated in an ever-richer pocket inside the dome.

"So pockets of molten radioactives are marked by mantle domes, somewhat as oil is associated with salt domes.

"The Texans —"

"I was waiting for them," Guchu muttered from the pilot's seat.

"Silence! By their ability to think big and to do big, the Texans provided the skill and unceasing industry to dig the roomy shafts."

"Lies!" Rosa interjected. "Our cyborged men provided that."

Fanninowicz continued unperturbed, "The lower courses of the shafts were lined with woven molecular-ribbon ferro-ceramics of great strength, through which the radioactives might gush upward, depositing on earth's surface great cones of thor-uranic ores. The Pharaohs built limestone pyramids in which they buried themselves with a little gold and a few soft gems. But the Texans have cajoled Nature into creating hundreds of radioactive pyramids, each worth hundreds of billions of dollars!"

"A few Texans got buried today in one of their hot pyramids," Guchu put in.

"While we Texo-Germans," Fanninowicz continued modestly but unshaken, "merely provided all the general theory and also the means to locate mantle domes."

"Which is?" Mendoza asked after a few seconds. He was still interested. Myself, I had become sickened by all this horrible talk of oceans of molten rock megameters deep. A planet is Hell with a crust! Then it occurred to me that my nausea might be the first symptoms of a dose of radioactivity.

When Fanninowicz, prior to an elaborate yawn, brushed his hand through his short hair, I was pleased to see that none fell out.

"Oh," he said tantalizingly, "we have had some success with counts of anti-neutrinos coming through the earth at night from the sun. But chiefly we have located mantle domes by the same method the Great Fuehrer's naval command located battleships in the Atlantic — that is, by dowsing over maps of Texas! Ho-ho, I see I have startled you. I see you are prepared to sneer. Do so, if you wish. It will not alter the fact that we Germans are the ancient and original spiers-out of metals, the ultimate chemists, the chthonic race, the wise old kobolds, as the names of the elements testify!"

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I did not listen to the discussion which followed, in which words like "cobalt" and "cuckoo" were bandied about. I was thinking that if only one dab of ferric ore were left in all Terra, a German would find it and forge from it an Iron Cross. My mind was also invaded by a compulsive, nightmarish vision in which a parade of Germans and Egyptians wound among vast, blue-lit pyramids, the hair of the marchers falling out on the way and their flesh shredding off and they slowly turning to shining blue skeletons topped by eerie animal heads and spiked gray helmets.

I was not aware the kack had landed until someone guided me from it, my exoskeleton jigging and shimmying from shiver-jerks in my chilled ghost muscles. I dimly noted puckered, black-eyed, leathery faces framed in fur. I smelled old hides, unwashed live ones, burning fat and cold machine oil. I glimpsed leather walls with shadows reeling across them. Then I felt coarse fur beneath me. I heard a faint shivery rattle, and realized just as I fell asleep, that it had come from my exo.

I spent the next two days in the encampment of the Crees, recuperating. Which, to a man with gravity sickness on a gravity-body, means no improvement at all, only a bitter hanging on to what little health he has, with growing irritability, fatigued restlessness, swift loss of reasonableness, and ballooning negativism.

There were a dozen tents masked by a strip of forest so thin and ragged that Amarillo Cuchillo and its airfield-spaceport could be glimpsed distantly through the stunted trees, with here and there small patrols of burly-looking Russians.

This nearness did not whet my hope. It only made me impatient.

Mendoza and the rest explained to me that I must stay hidden while they made contact and dickered with the Russians. My Texan height and generally strange appearance, they said, might arouse suspicion in the Russian military, who might not have been informed at all about the part I had played in the Bent-Back Revolt.

I argued at all this. Was I not *El Esqueleto,* I asked, and was he not known by now around the world? Even Rachel and Rosa could not win from me more than surly agreement to cooperate for the present.

The Crees were an interesting if somber folk. For instance, small jars of petroleum and chunks of coal were their money and also their gods, because they had learned that those black substances were the energy-filled re-

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sidue of all animal and plant life. These they never burned, but used in trade and buried in small quantity with the dead, to "seed" them toward a similar immortality.

But the Crees did not interest me. They irked me with their atrocious English and worse Spanish and with their body odors, different from mine though no worse. I did my best to ignore them.

As for staying hidden and sensibly horizontal, well, except when Russian patrols came near, I spent my days prowling about the camp with El Tacito in scowling attendance. I frequently stopped for glimpses of the silvery needle-prow of the *Tsiolkovsky* or the *Goddard* waiting at the spaceport to take me home — at any rate that was why I felt it was there.

Meanwhile, I thought, I was wasting precious time that I could have put to use asserting my claim to the radioactive gusher — for despite Fanninowicz's babble about dowsing and such, it seemed obvious that the Lost Crazy-Russian Pitchblende Mine had been the clue that had led the Texans to drill a mohole there.

Over and over the story, ending as he began:
"Make ye no truce with Adam-Zad—the Bear that walks like a man!
When he stands up as pleading, in wavering, man-brute guise,
When he veils the hate and cunning of his little swinish eyes;
When he shows as seeking quarter, with paws like hands in prayer,
That is the time of peril—the time of the Truce of the Bear!"

—"The Truce of the Bear," by Rudyard Kipling (1898)

My colleagues' suggestions that I forget about the mine, that I face the fact that Russia had never permitted the exploitation of her mineral wealth by foreign-

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ers, and that I consider myself damn lucky if they managed to procure me an exit visa and transport to Circumluna — all these reasonable suggestions I listened to with great hostility and a growing suspicion that they wanted me off Terra so they could seize my wealth.

Suggestions that I have patience — Mendoza's that I learn Cree, Rachel's that I take up bow-and-arrow, Guchu's that I drop acid — I only snarled at.

Perhaps by this time I had developed a mild chronic delirium from skin infections and fringe-adequate blood supply to the brain. But I doubt it. I think it was sheer bloated egotism on my part, slightly augmented by gravity disease. Here I was a great and heroic actor, and I was being treated like a bum.

At any rate, when Mendoza and Father Francisco went to dicker the first day and did not return, when Guchu and Rosa and Rachel —and even Fanninowicz! — took off on the second in the kack and didn't come back either or send word, I decided on action.

I engaged El Tacito in a game of gin rummy and then a bout of drinking same — I mean rum, not gin. When he was thoroughly soused I put him to bed, took his lightning pistols, equipped my exoskeleton with my last fresh batteries and waited for dawn.

At its first glimmer I emerged from our tent, menaced with my telescopic swords the Crees who would have stopped me and walked straight to Amarillo Cuchillo.

Dawn was red when I reached the town and encountered a neat new sign with the ten Cyrillic characters spelling out "Zhawlty Nawsh." Like the Texans, the Russians had literally translated Yellowknife.

I also encountered my first pair of Russian soldiers.

I'll admit that their extreme burliness and even greater hairiness startled me at first. Ever since Tearful Suzy the space hostess had mentioned "them fearful furry Russians," I had assumed that all the references I heard to the hirsuteness of the Soviets were only one more ridiculous expression of that curse of Terran man, xenophobia.

Not so. The feet, hands, and faces, not to mention head, neck and ears, of these two infantrymen were entirely covered by thick fur, which also bulked up their coarsely woven summer uniforms. Their nails too were thickened, somewhat in the direction of claws, but seemingly not enough to interfere with humanoid manipulations.

After the first shock, the effect was delightful. The human eye

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looks quite soulful when surrounded by fur. It has something of the effect of a dolphin's eye, while the fur itself modestly proclaims, "I am merely an animal, nothing special, comrade. There is nothing of the anthropocentric, supercilious, god-and-devil-creating witchdoctor about *me*."

They seemed easily to accept my strangeness too, after a moment's initial shock. Most cosmopolitan beasts, I thought.

And when one of the two responded to my "*Zdraste, tovarisch,*" with a softly guttural, "*Spasebaw,*" and in answer to my question gave me the simple directions needed to reach the Registry of Mining Claims, I felt preposterously pleased, as if I were in a fairyland of talking animals.

Of course these were very different Russians from the generally hairless Slavic Thins, Fats and Athletics of Circumluna, but in a way I liked them better. They seemed less supercilious, less morally conceited and puritanical.

One of the soldiers stayed at his post, the other companionably dropped in beside me, carrying his laser rifle in a relaxed, casual manner.

I pointed toward the distant, silvery prow of the spaceship rising above the low buildings around us and asked, "*Goddard?*"

"Nyet," he replied emphatically.

"*Tsiolkovsky?*" I suggested.

"Da!" he confirmed in something of a growl, eying me for a moment severely before resuming his smiling, animal placidity.

We passed several bombed and laser-charred areas.

We met ten more furry soldier-pairs before we reached the Registry, and in each instance the first procedure was repeated, so that by the time I entered the dingy building I had an escort of what seemed to me charming and docile teddy-bears, of average human height but more than human breadth. The facts that I was a good two feet taller than any of them and that none of them showed surprise at my height or exoskeleton doubtless added to my feeling of fairytale confidence.

It did not even bother me when the bear-soldiers pressed into the building before, beside and behind me, and then remained in a half circle around me as I introduced myself to a Kapitan Taimanov, a gloriously golden-furred Russian who appeared to be in charge of things at the Registry. I believed they were merely child-curious about me.

Taimanov waved me into a seat, called for vodka and caviar, and offered me a box from which I took a long thin cigarette. He snapped his furry fingers, and a

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soldier leaped to light it. Somewhat to my disappointment, it was only tobacco. Nevertheless I puffed it graciously.

Kapitan Taimanov was all smiles and courtesy. We chatted together lightly of Ivan the Terrible and Stalin, of Dostoyevsky and Pasternak, of Moussorgsky and Khachaturian, of Alekhine and Keres. We almost started to play a game of chess. The only time his lip curled up from his formidable teeth was when a brown-pelted soldier ran his tongue around his furry mouth as I downed my sip and the captain his glass of vodka.

We complimented each other on our command of Russian, though his seemed to me a kind of pidgin compared to that I'd picked up in Circumluna.

Then he led the conversation around to myself.

For starters, I explained that I was a simple worker in the Communist underground in Texas and how I had played the part of *Kawstee Chiluhvehk* or Bone Man — El Esqueleto — from Dallas to Fort Johnson, helping foment the Bent-Back Revolution which had drawn Ranger units southward from Zhawlty Nawsh.

"Then I take it you are not one of ours?" he said. "I mean, those grown tall by deliberate misuse of the directional hormone in the laboratories and creches of Lake Baikal, taught Texan and sent to infiltrate that last evil stronghold of capitalism?"

"No," I answered truthfully. "What is this about misuse of the directional hormone? I thought it was used solely by Texans to give them greater height."

He laughed and said, "I can see you are an innocent in some matters — that freakish thing, a native revolutionary." He paused a moment to frown, the short golden fur of his forehead furrowing. "Or else those at Baikal decided it was best to equip you with a completely false memory and identity. No matter. As for the directional hormone, we Russians employ it as Nature always intended — horizontally, so that we are stronger without additional strains on the heart, men able to cope with the surface gravity of Jupiter, if that should ever become necessary. It also acts upon our hair in a multiplicatory fashion, producing those pelts which make Siberian weather far easier to cope with and which also make summer nudity more esthetic and cultural. Ah, my poor friend, you should see us sporting by the tens of thousands on the beaches around Baikal and the Black Sea!"

"Or around the nearest mud-

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hole," I thought I heard a soldier mutter.

But Taimanov did not catch that. He was slowly and solemnly looking me up and down, concealing whatever pity or contempt he may have felt for my miserable figure — asthenic or cerebrotonic ultimate — in contrast with his own magnificent animal one. Finally he said most soulfully, a tear dripping from his left eye, "Poor tortured comrade, I can see without being told that you have spent many years in the prisons of Texas. It must have been there that you learned Russian, from some equally unfortunate and heroic captive. No, you do not have to explain, I know it all. They have accused us Russians of brainwashing our enemies by deprivation of food, sleep and exercise, but what nation — except Texas! — has applied carefully calculated starvation — and perhaps the rack! — to a point where a man is literally skin and bones, his muscles shriveled possibly beyond regeneration? Truly, the Soviets owe you much! But tell me this — what unsung genius of the revolution provided you with that most clever powered framework which enables you to walk?"

"The Russians gave it to me," I answered, thinking further to win his favor — and actually lying not so much. At least half the technicians who had built my exo had been Circumlunan Russians.

"*Chawrtuh vuh ahduh!*" he cursed, half rising to his feet and pounding on the table until the bottle jumped; and it would have cracked, except it was four inches thick. "For fifty years the military has been asking the scientists for powered body-armor for soldiers, and now at last we see it — secretly given away to a foreign agent by the state security apparatus! Your pardon, comrade. This is not your fault, but the practice makes me furious."

"You and your soldiers look to me so physically powerful," I put in placatingly, "that it would seem you would have no need of mechanical aids."

"True, we are as strong as kodiak bears," he agreed. "But with powered body-armor, we could leap rivers and single-handed encounter tanks and devastate cities. The atomic bomb would become a side-arm. One soldier could liberate an entire Central American country. Grrr!"

The idea of bears able to leap rivers sounded to me about as desirable as spiders able to fly, though I did not voice the thought.

Meanwhile Taimanov was muttering, "Nothing too good for our foreign agents! Anything good

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enough for our soldiers! Grrr! But once more your pardon. Have more vodka. How else can I serve you?"

Emboldened by this encouragement and another large sip of vodka, I told him about my local mining claim. I pointed out that as an ardent revolutionary crippled for life, I perhaps deserved financial compensation.

He looked interested, said, "Da?" and inquired if I had documents to prove my claim.

Now was my big moment. I asked if he could provide me with the amenities of a powerful sunlamp and a razor or electric clippers.

Though mystified, he complied with my request. The electric clippers were especially fine, and he confided in me that he cut his entire pelt close — *en brosch* — for the summer months.

Downing half of another vodka, I unlocked my rib-cage at its center and folded it away to either side. Next I unzipped my winter suit from neck to crotch. The soldiers murmured approvingly at the amount of hair disclosed. I clipped it all off close and directed the large sunlamp at my ventral side.

"You are *that cold,* tovarisch?" Taimanov expostulated. "Even the vodka has not warmed you? Perhaps a steam bath —"

I lifted my hand and pointed it toward my middle.

"Watch," I said.

The twelve pairs of fur-circled soulful eyes grew larger as tiny blue-gray marks began to appear on my torso. Soon the message there was completely developed.

Beginning high on my chest and traveling interminably downward, somewhat distorted by the scars of my patio crawl and by various rashes, but legible all the same, were line after line of slate-blue print and script, interspersed with signatures, X-marks, letterheads and seals.

It was all upside-down to me, but I knew it by heart.

For it was simply a facsimile of Nicholas Nimzovitch Nisard's provisional claim to his pitchblende mine, together with the three transfers of ownership and a Circumlunan confirmation.

My father hadn't entrusted me with the provisional claim but, probably stealing the idea from some spy story, had had a facsimile of it tattooed on my chest and belly in a preparation of silver nitrate, so that it would be invisible until I exposed it to bright sunlight or a sunlamp, whereupon the hitherto invisible silver would precipitate out as a dark powder and the claim appear written on my skin, clearly and permanently.

I had certainly had a devil of

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a time keeping it undeveloped, especially in Lamar's patio. Now I felt fully repaid for my efforts.

I explained the gist of the document and its postscripts to Kapitan Taimanov.

He was amazed, as were his soldiers. He told me that I could undoubtedly obtain some large financial compensation, though it was not within his immediate power to grant it. General Kan would have to be consulted and possibly Novy Moscow. He poured me another vodka, offered me another cigarette and came around his desk to examine the tattooing more closely.

I delicately sipped white fire and savored that burnt essence of earthiness, tobacco.

Taimanov pointed a furry finger, horn-tipped, at the nethermost seal, a mandala quartering a cogwheel, tuning fork, beaker and atom.

"What is that?" he inquired.

"The great seal of Circumluna," I explained, "confirming all the writing above to be authentic. You see, there is one further detail about myself which I have neglected to tell you: that in addition to my revolutionary status I am also a Circumlunan of the Sack, visiting Terra under the protection of —"

My words were lost in Taimanov's growl of fury and command. I realized that somehow success and vodka had made me careless.

Before I could so much as up the power of my exo, I was seized from all sides. A hard paw-edge chopped expertly between my headbasket and shoulder girdle, paralyzing me and, I thought, breaking my neck. Quite unnecessarily another hand jabbed up under the front of my rib-cage into my solar plexus, cutting off my breath.

Then Taimanov, his face the mask of an enraged bear, procured a pair of insulated wire cutters and snipped all the leads from my batteries to my servomotors.

I was hoisted up and rushed across the street to the old Amarillo Cuchillo jail, where my exo was removed and the two lightning pistols in my pouch waved in my face as proof that I was an assassin at least. I was shaken until I decided my neck wasn't broken, but would be shortly.

Next I found myself strapped down on a table, again quite unnecessarily, and being interrogated by a formidable black-furred Colonel Bolbochan, who smoked an atrocious fat cigar, about a Circumlunan plot to seize all Russia and, though he seemed to think this matter of minor importance, the rest of Terra. He de-

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manded to know how I had smuggled myself out of the *Tsiolkovsky*, what special instructions for sabotage and terrorism I had been given and what devilish plans for further horrors the crew of the *Tsiol* had up their sleeves.

Apparently the ground-bear Russians were unable to assault the ship directly, though able to prevent its takeoff. It was a mystery to me.

In vain I insisted that I had left the *Tsiol* at Dallas and thereafter devoted myself to a rabble-rousing advantageous to Russia. In vain I assured him that the Circumlunan Russians were very nice people and constituted somewhat less than half of its population, and that they certainly had no designs against or much interest in Terran Russia. In vain I explained that I wasn't a true dweller in Circumluna, only an inhabitant of the sub-proletarian Sack, a harmless actor.

When after a short period I did not produce answers of the sort Bolbochan wanted, I was systematically beaten with rubber truncheons. The humiliation was immense and the pain most excruciating. I had feared I would be driven mad if again deprived of my exoskeleton on Terra, but that fear was quite swallowed up in the physical agonies I was suffering. The shock of the blows prevented me from inventing a story that might even temporarily have satisfied the Black Colonel. It even stopped me from getting any profit from the philosophic notion that Death should make himself familiar with suffering, pain and all other approaches toward . . . himself.

At one point I was asked to name my confederates: those still aboard the *Tsiol*, those who had sneaked aground with me and also the still fouler beings — Terran collaborators with the Russo-Circumlunan devils.

The only thing that kept me silent then was the remaining tatter of rational thought that it wouldn't help me one bit to have Mendoza and Company rounded up and beaten like myself. Still, I would soon have confessed even that, to halt the torture, if Black Bolbochan's questions had not gone rocketing off into a farago about "moon monsters" which the satellitic Russians were planning to set loose in Siberia. Was I a moon monster?

He had embarked on an even wilder inquiry about "Mars beetles" capable of devouring all Terra's vegetation, when a grizzled General Kan came galloping in and raised his hand — to command, I supposed, new and more ingenious tortures.

But I never learned what they were, for at that moment a velvet-gloved inner blackness seized me

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and dragged me deep, deep down.

Death, With Spiders

As I came back to consciousness — or rather, as consciousness came back to me, for I certainly didn't want it — I discovered that I was in my coffin and they were nailing it up.

The hammering awakened all of my old pains and a remarkable number of new ones. And the greatest of the new ones was cold.

I figured that there must be about ten hammerers pounding away, and the nails by now as thick as pearls on a string.

I knew I was still on Terra, because Gravity was in the coffin with me. It struck me as peculiarly unfair that Gravity should operate even inside coffins. One would think that at least death would bring release from the horrible force, but it doesn't. Such are the merciless ways of Terra.

I commanded my eyes to open, so that I could look at the absolute darkness around me. I knew it would be absolute darkness, because no slightest glow came through my eyelids.

But my eyelids, which were heavy and thick with one of the new pains, refused to part. One more proof that I was dead indeed.

How I could still feel pain while dead was a problem which I pigeonholed. I guess I didn't want to have to admit that Hell existed.

I attempted to reassess my situation philosophically. I was in great cold, in absolute darkness, in great pain (pigeonhole that one!), and inside my coffin (and they were still pounding on it).

Well, one expects a coffin to be chilly and dark. It is also in the nature of coffins to be nailed up (though this one was taking a long time about it).

But, especially if one has any illusions whatever left about the courtesy of humanity, one expects a coffin to fit — to be, in my case, about ten by two by one-and-a-half feet, inside dimensions. And, if humanity is especially considerate, to be comfortably lined, preferably with quilted silk.

My coffin had no lining, and it definitely did not fit. In fact, from the way my body was contorted, I could tell that it was little more than four by four by four feet. My head, tilted up, lay in a bottom corner. My back was gravity-pressed against the coffin's hard bottom, which had a lattice of cracks in it, rather like the floor of President Lamar's

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patio. My legs rose sharply up and my feet were wedged into the upper corner of the box opposite my head.

Yes, my coffin was a mere box, an ignominious cube. And would they please stop pounding on it!

It next occurred to me that, as a Hero of the Bent-Back Revolution, I should have been encoffined in high state, wearing my exoskeleton and with at least two gold medals, the other reading Socialist Actor Extraordinary.

But I clearly didn't have my exoskeleton. I was wearing only my winter suit and it was strangely loose on my torso, accounting in part for my frigid state.

I began to try to figure out what had happened to me prior to my encoffination. My first theory was that I had been thrown down the Crazy-Russian Mohole, landed in a bed of feathers a kilometer thick and found myself in the Realm of the Dead, whose monitors had nailed me up in this cramping and shameful box as punishment for impersonating Death in the world above.

And were continuing to nail.

There were several things wrong with that theory. To mention only one, the Crazy-Russian Mohole was filled from bottom to top with red-hot and blue-radioactive magma.

I tried to think of another theory, but the hammering wouldn't let me. Instead, it re-ignited my every pain.

It got louder and louder, less and less endurable.

It became a hammering not on my coffin, but on my headbasket, then on my naked skull and face.

As I realized I had been wanting to do all along, I escaped by dying.

I instantly made a remarkable discovery. Whether one dies for a minute or a million years, it seems no time at all to the one who dies.

For the next thing I knew, consciousness had come snuffling back to my body like the persistent beast it is. It sniffed me from head to toes, from feet to fingertips. Then it nuzzled my neck and leaped inside my skull and curled up there, wide-eyed, ears a-prick, and still sniffing.

I was in precisely the same situation as I had been before, except for one wonderful difference: the hammering had stopped. I still felt a wide spectrum of pains, but now I felt them silently. Whoever had been pounding my coffin had gone away.

Perhaps the pounding had been only in my head all along. Perhaps it had been the pounding of my heart frantically trying to make my ghost-muscles work by over-supplying them with glucose

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and oxygen, and now at last sensibly shifted into neutral and only idling along.

I wondered if it was now pumping hard enough to keep alive my toes, which were so high above me. Oh well, better gangrene of the toes than gangrene of the brain, my Consciousness informed me.

Where did I get the idea I was alive when I knew I was dead? Better suppress it. Cool it, Consciousness!

I worked hard on keeping myself dead. I concentrated on stilling every part of myself, beginning with the toes. This worked very well on my muscles, since most of them were ghosts to begin with, non-functional in six lunagravs. There was the bonus that as I stilled each area of my body, the pain stopped coming from it.

I worked at suppressing my thoughts too, especially any effort to remember what had happened to me.

I also held onto the sneaky point that if only I were patient, if only I remained passive while enough time passed — not very much — then I would surely be dead of freezing, dehydration, heart failure, starvation or gangrene of the toes. In approximately that order.

I do believe I would have completed the operation successfully except for one very nasty circumstance.

Two large and sturdy spiders appeared on either side of me and began determinedly to explore the floor of my cubical coffin.

When I say "appeared," I do not mean I saw them. But I became aware of them. I felt them. However, I had started to get a glow in my eyes that seemed not so much the random shooting-off of rods and cones as light coming through my immovable lids. In fact, I was working to suppress that glow when the two spiders turned up.

It happens that I have an irrational dread of spiders, though there are few in the Sack and those chiefly in arachnidariums, where they get along as well in freefall as insects and all other tiny beasts to whom gravity or its absence are matters of small moment.

So that when these turned up in my coffin, I was pretty thoroughly terrorized.

A peculiarly horrible particular was that these spiders were cripples. Each had had three legs amputated, but the operations had been completely successful and they got around very well on their remaining five legs.

How I could know so much about the spiders without being able to see into their minds also troubled me. Not, as I have said,

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that I have any psi talents, or that spiders are known to be open to telepathy. Still, I was troubled.

Finally, the spiders seemed much too much interested in my wrists, persistently nuzzling them and even pushing and pulling them around. I waited each moment for the stab of a poison fang. Go on, spiders, get it over with, I found myself thinking — it only is a sixth way of dying.

Then the two spiders approacheded my sides and began to crawl up onto my body, dragging my arms behind them.

It was at this point I realized the spiders were my two hands.

Though it may seem strange to some, this was no great improvement. Lying helpless in the dark while one's two hands begin to operate completely on their own, schizophrenically, is almost as bad as spiders would have been, believe me.

Pinching first my suit and then cruelly pinching the skin of my chest, which was to my surprise smooth and hairless, they crawled up side by side to my neck, where they parted, each making for an ear.

By Pluto, I thought, they are planning to strangle me!

Why the idea of being strangled, or even self-strangled,

Here now in his triumph where all things falter,
Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,
As a god self-slain on his own strange altar
Death lies dead.

—"A Forsaken Garden," by
Algernon Charles Swinburne

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should have terrified me so, when I was exerting every atom of will-power to kill myself and/or keep myself dead, is pretty mysterious. Perhaps by now I was becoming luxury-minded and wanted to die in comfort, with ever-diminishing pains.

But then I noticed that neither of my hands had left a thumb behind on my windpipe, as they would surely have done if their purpose had been strangulation and they had any sense at all.

I relaxed a bit and waited with some curiosity to see what they were up to.

You see, I was already crediting them with sense and purpose. They say a man is essentially two hands and a brain. I was pretty sure by now that my hands were cooperating with a section or self of my brain below the conscious level, which last level had been wanting only to die and/or stay dead — until this moment, when curiosity had begun to motivate it.

Meanwhile my crawling hands had each gripped an earlobe very tightly with thumb and trigger finger. From this secure base, and with each digging little finger into cheek, they dug middle finger and ring finger into my upper and lower eyelids, and then spread.

This caused me even more pain than I expected, because it turned out that my eyelids were extremely badly swollen. Also, my eyeballs were unusually sensitive. I got the impression that this area of my face at least had undergone a severe allergic reaction, or else received repeated blows.

But no matter how hard I willed them to stop and despite the hoarse little screams that now began to issue from my dry throat, my fingers went cruelly and remorsely about their business.

Bright gray light lanced into my eyes and tormented my retinas and the visual corners of my brain — a third and not to be under-rated pain.

Finally tears came, and at first they were a pain too. For a while I saw only their glimmer and the yellow blurs of matter floating in them.

Gradually the pains diminished. My swollen lids became able to blink with my fingers' help and even assume most of the work of keeping themselves open. My tears washed the grainy, gluey stuff away, and I was able to see.

I was in the mortised stone cell with a door of bars and a small barred window. Its dimensions were those of the height of a Mexican door, so I assumed it had originally been built by Texans for bent-backs.

The light came through the window and another like it in the corridor beyond the door of bars.

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Through the nearer window I could see a high sign which carried, white on black, the ten Cyrillic characters spelling out "Zhawlty Nawsh."

So I was not in the hands of the Rangers, but the Russians.

Horrible memories began to rise.

I kept them submerged while I traveled my gaze down my body from my catercornered toes.

My black winter suit was open wide from my crotch to my neck, revealing my hairless front covered by upsidedown lines of legal writing.

I remembered everything — in particular, every last stupidity.

It only made me want to die.

But even as I felt that, I noted that my fingers had left my eyes, which stayed open a fair slit without manual aid, and were crawling down my torso toward my crotch, where I was intuitively sure they intended to start zipping me up.

This indication that the survival urge was once again in control had the effect of steadying if not cheering me. While my hands worked, I began the unpleasant business of assessing my situation.

Fortunately in such a case one need not begin by facing the worst, but can work up to it by easy stages. For instance, the first healthy reaction to a feeling of extreme guilt is the attempt to shift as much of that guilt as possible to other people.

So it was not unnatural that my first thoughts were about my father, not angry so much as gently pitying thoughts, very sentimental.

The poor old boob, I thought, running his theater in space, not knowing a damn thing about Terra, but dreaming his idiot dream about the mining claim that would one day make us all rich.

Did it occur to him that the claim was only provisional? That the country in which it was registered had changed hands at least once and now two times? That the Terrans have millions of laws to stop boobs like himself from asserting their rights and claiming cash due them, and that without exception the Terrans are a planet of swindlers and roughnecks, intent only on money and power and ready on the slightest provocation to substitute violence for legal procedure? Oh, no!

And then he had got the superidiot idea of sending me, his only son, down to terrible Terra to cash in on the mining claim.

He did get the Longhairs to build me a remarkable exoskeleton. I granted him that. But did he otherwise enlist their aid in his project? At least they knew a hell of a lot more about Terra than he did.

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No and double no! Instead he supplied me with a cloak, caneswords and an idiotically secret document.

And I, super-boob that I was, had accepted this ridiculous role, even gloried in it. For a whole terrible month on Terra, I had not lived, I had *acted* my way through everything.

First I had been tempted by a mysterious role in a Texan palace revolution.

Next I had eagerly plunged into the role of Death, leader of a grotesque adobe-hut revolution.

Finally I had been unable to resist putting on a brief show of surprises for some talking bears — an ultimate in wrong-way animal acts.

Had even my love for Rosa and Rachel been anything but theater? Probably not. Everybody is always telling us actors that because we feel or seem to feel so much in the theater, we can't feel anything in real life.

Well then, face it, Scully, I told myself. For you, the great themes of Love and Death can be nothing but melodrama. You're playing a small role in a vast thriller with an unknown finish.

Except that your role, bar last-minute rescues, seems just about ready to finish in death in an unheated Russian prison cell.

So start playing that role and quit bawling!

At that moment I heard a familiar voice roaring in the corridor. The language was Russian, but the import was pure Texan.

"Quit fussing at me, you furry little fools! I want to see comrade La Cruz instanter. As consular agent of Texas in Zhawlty Nawsh, I got the right. Besides, can't you get the fur out of your eyes long enough to recognize General Kan's seal and signature? If you keep hindering me, I'll report you to him. I'll report you to Number One in Novy Moscow. I'll hold up on those chess sets from the Black Republic. I'll even stop that shipment of firewater and fisheggs I got coming in from Quebec! There, fellas, that's more like it now."

Then a great familiar bulk filled the barred, Mexican-short doorway.

"Wal, partner," the bulk said, "you sure have got yourself in the goldurnedest, most miserablest, hopelessest fix since Sam Houston got his army backed against the San Jacinto River just before the like-named battle."

I never would have thought that a time would ever come when the person I was most happy to see of all the *hombres* in the ripsnortin', melodramatic universe was Elmo Oilfield Earp. But that time had come!

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Fixing

By the next day, 24th Spindletop, Elmo had got me in quite rapid succession, the following comforts: soup, a mattress a battery to heat my winter suit, a larger cell and — at last! — my exoskeleton. The Russians have removed its swords and all batteries but two, so that it operates at about quarter power. Sometimes I feel I am carrying it around, rather than it me. And when I plug in my suit heater, it stops moving altogether. Still, it is wonderful wearing it again.

At first I had been so happy to see Elmo that it had not occurred to me to wonder how he came to be there.

Later, thinking it over, I realized he must have been planning everything from our first meeting at Spaceport Dallas, possibly even earlier. I have not asked him straight out if he is a Russian secret agent, and he has certainly not volunteered that information.

The war is over, he tells me. Russia says she is planning no further advances, Texas no reprisals, and a truce has been agreed to. Elmo's story is that he is a loyal Texan who just happened to be in the neighborhood when Texas sorely needed a consular agent in Zhawlty Nawsh. Just happened to be! But perhaps I had best pretend to believe this tall tale. As the big rascal says, "Scully, most people in this imperfect world are so set on what they got to have, come hell or high water, and on what they won't take under no circumstances, that there just got to be a few fixers around — broad-minded *hombres* willing to sacrifice their personal integrity, or even on rare occasions their sacred honor, just to get life moving again, or keep it barely turning over like a wore-out engine."

He confirmed my belated suspicion that all the rank-and-file Russians and most of the officer and beaurocrat class firmly believe that the Russians of Circumluna are the ultimate devils, the Super-Trotskyites, worse than Chinese, Texans or the blackest-dyed fascists or inkiest Blacks. Well, why shouldn't they, after a century of propaganda attributing every evil from meteorite showers to anti-Soviet dreams to the malignant intervention of intellectual Russians in the sky?

But, Elmo says, the Russian inner elite, her real rulers, have come to realize that their country desperately needs certain items which only Circumluna can furnish them: fine instruments, com-

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puter circuits, new higher maths. They are seeking a rapprochement with Circumluna which will permit trade without scandalizing or even driving into revolt the rank-and-file.

General Kan, I gather, is the sole member of the elite. He has been able to prevent attacks on the *Tsiolkovsky*, but he must keep her crew in quarantine to satisfy military prejudice. He also was the one who halted my torture, though not daring to go so far as to command special care for me. That had to be left to Elmo the Fixer, so he could be blamed if necessary.

We had beet borsch for dinner.

Next day Elmo procured me the unheard-of amenity of a hot bath. I was unwilling until I learned El Tacito and Mendoza would give it to me, in guise of Elmo's greaser servants. I was considerably refreshed, though my varicosities, etc., had worsened dismally. I quit prison-pacing, got a maximum of horizontal.

Tas slipped me twin notes from Rosa and Rachel. Both hoping for my swift recovery and wishing me good fortune. Both signed, "Affectionately." I wondered if either or both of them would come to the moon with me. By their ultimatum to me, I would have to choose between them. It would be a very hard choice. I decided to play the scenes as they came.

That evening Elmo brought such good news I could hardly believe it. It set my imagination racing. Through General Kan, he has learned that the Russian inner elite is considering a deal whereby *I*, as hero of the bent-back revolution, would be presented with "reward" of materials needed by Circumluna. Later, still as hero, not Circumlunan or Sackabond, I would make "party contribution" of stuff Russia needs from Circumluna.

As part of the deal, I would also have formally to give up my family's claim to the Lost Crazy-Cree (new name) Pitchblende Mine. I asked him, "Why so much fuss by pirates over paper proprieties?"

He replied, "Scully, you don't understand these Russians. If their fur were as all tied up as their nerves are inside them, they'd be kinky as blacks. They're not relaxed like Texans. They don't think broad and easy about moral and legal issues. When they pull a fast one, they want every detail that reflects a bit of good on them pinned down tight."

I then asked him worriedly that if the "gift" to me were automatically supposed to go to the Circumlunans, would I also be able to use it to get from the Cir-

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cumlunans the concessions I wanted for the La Cruz Theater and all sackabonds? He told me, "Look, Scully, you hang onto that gift and you bargain with it until you get what you want. I guarantee you the Longhairs will play ball. I'm sorry to say it, Scully, but I sometimes think you weren't born with the business sense of a squirrel — what am I saying, squirrel? I mean lemming."

On reconsideration, this makes me wonder if Elmo weren't in on the whole deal to bring me down to Terra — the building of my exoskeleton, even father's idiot notion . . . I don't know where to stop.

Next day, Spindletop 26th, there was a hideous development. We got meat soup, but I couldn't touch it. Elmo brought news that Russians demand the facsimile mining claim, flayed from my chest, before they will play ball. They insist on their "pound of flesh," as bad as Shylock. They've promised to make repair skin-graft on me, but that would take more weeks, months on Terra with chances of survival very slim. Elmo said, "Don't worry, Scully. I'll argue my best with them, though they're stubborner critters than President Austin was, bless him, the pighead. When a bear decides to claw you, it's hard to change his mind by appealing to his logic and common sense."

To get my mind off this horrible possibility, I gave it the tough task of figuring out which of the two girls to ask to marry me. After long listings of their good and bad qualities, my feelings, etc., I decided on Rosa Morales. The chief point is that, under all fieriness, she has basic Latin submissiveness, I think. While Rachel would try to run me. I was not happy about my decision.

Elmo also reported that Fanninowicz has formally defected to the Russians. When and if he recovers from the dose of radioactivity he got at the gusher, he will go to Novy Tech as full professor of engineering and design power-armor for Russian soldiers, borrowing many details from my exoskeleton, I'm sure. It figures. If all Terra felt peaceful except one destruction-bent farm-boy, a German would build him a slingshot.

On Spindletop 27th, the Russians were still after my hide. Yet life must go on, no matter what horrors loom, so when Rosa visited me in jail, I proposed marriage to her. She kept me in suspense for a long time, made me really argue.

Clincher was when I told her she would be top free-fall dancing girl and star acrobat in La Cruz

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Theater. I added, "Besides — but don't tell anyone this — I have always had a terrific yen for short girls."

She yielded then and immediately demanded we summon "the Honorable Miss Lamar," and tell her about my decision in Rosa's presence.

Here I drew the line and also blew my top. I insisted that while still on Terra I simply could not bear to hurt in that way Rachel, who had done so many things for me, even saved my life. She could be told after Rosa and I were off Earth, but not now. Rosa told me the marriage-deal was off. We argued and argued.

We finally hit on a compromise. With Rosa looking on and fighting over each word, wanting to make it harsher, I wrote Rachel a letter breaking the news gently, but telling her in no uncertain terms I was marrying Rosa and leaving tall Texans forever, sorry about that. We then gave the letter to Elmo, to be delivered to Rachel immediately after *Tsiol*'s blast-off.

I also extracted from Rosa her promise — hand on imaginary Bible, heart crossed — that she will not tell Rachel, by word or indirection, about her victory.

I told Elmo I would be taking him up on that "wife" reservation

After the burial-parties leave
And the baffled kites have fled;
The wise hyaenas come out at eve
To take account of our dead.
—Rudyard Kipling

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on *Tsiol*. He grinned and made a ring of thumb and middle finger, to assure me it was as good as done.

Afterwards I felt miserable, but reminded myself I had taken the only sensible course. After all, every woman in the universe is basically monogamous and accepts other arrangements — polygamy, even polyandry, etc. — when they are only game in town.

Secretly I know I will grieve forever for Rachel. Yet I have done the wise thing.

Besides, there is always Idris McIllwraith.

28th Spindletop was a day for rejoicing. The Russians agreed to content themselves with photographs of my ventral side, plus quitclaim signed and sworn to by me, provided Father sends down original claim by first rocket. I patted myself on chest with *great* feelings of relief. Departure is planned for tomorrow.

All my happiness was completely dashed when Rachel paid me an unexpected visit in jail. From zenith to nadir in one easy jump. She was wearing Black-Madonna rig, damn her, minus pistols of course, and looking very chipper.

Her chipperness faded, but she kept brave smile as she said, "Captain Skull, I wish to tender you my sincerest congratulations and wish you a long life of bliss."

"Thanks, but what do you mean?" I asked, automatically sparring for time. "That I won't lose my front skin? Yes, I'll be happy about that the rest of my life. I don't know about blissful."

"You know what I mean," she said softly. "You and Rosa. From the first time I saw you together, I knew you were meant for each other. That's why I lit into her so fierce. Even then I realized I was just a clumsy old Texas gal, meant to be a poetry-writin' and little-theater old maid, and nothin' else. But don't you grieve, Scully, don't you give me a thought, except maybe to remember just for a moment on dark nights in space that there was once a platinum-haired girl in black on a silver horse, who loved you a little."

"What do you mean, me and Rosa?" I asked. Dammit, Rosa had *promised* me she wouldn't tell! "And who is supposed to have loved me a little, you or your horse?"

"You know what I mean, Scully," she said and then added in a shaky whisper, "Marryin' up. Gettin' hitched."

"Did Rosa tell you that?" I demanded furiously, my voice shaking. Dammit, a promise is a promise.

"Oh, no, she didn't tell me in so many words," Rachel assured

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me. "But I knew she'd been visiting you. And nobody could have misread the meaning of the brightness in her eyes. Besides that, she danced all over the tent." Then the Black Madonna drew herself up. "As for my horse, Scully, if he ever meets up with you again, I hope he kicks your face in!"

At that moment I became, in absolutely cold blood, an utter cad. I said, "Listen to me, Rachel, Rosa lied to you, or at any rate, she did everything in her power to create a false impression. When she visited me yesterday here, she asked me to marry her and I turned her down. Oh, I was as nice about it as I could be. You and I both know she's a good little trouper. But in essence I turned her down. You're the only woman I ever loved in my life, princess, and you know it. Captain Skull's heart is yours — to tromp on or toss aside, if that's your pleasure — but yours forever!"

Despite my eloquence, it took me a remarkably long time to win her. She was especially suspicious about me having turned Rosa down. Feeling myself every second a vicious hypocrite and complete villain, I had to invent proof after proof until she consented to believe me. And then there still remained all the work of persuading Rachel to marry me. I finally managed it only by promising her she'd be star tragedienne of the La Cruz Theater and that we'd produce both *Houston's Afire* and *Storm Over El Paso*. (Would they be fringe-acceptable? Oh, well, we have play-doctors. I'm one myself.)

I also had to add, "Besides — but don't tell anyone this — I have always had a terrific yen for tall girls."

"How'd you find that out?" she demanded. "What other tall females has your fickle heart been fixed on, Scully darlin'?"

Great Jupiter! I had to talk fast and watch my every word not to bring in the name of Idris McIllwraith.

But in the end she did accept me.

And then — oh, my aching mind — we had to repeat every detail Rosa had insisted on, down to Rachel supervising me while I wrote the letter of sad rejection to Rosa, and we sealed it and handed it over to Elmo for delivery. My nerves were *zinging* for fear he'd give the show away, but he didn't.

After Rachel had gone, however, he did tell me, "Scully, I must say I think you're a natural-born hero of the punishment-seeking sort. Wives are a combination of gadfly, rattlesnake and

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colt or sow. I ain't ever had the unwisdom, and maybe nerve too, to take on even one. And here you are putting yourself in the ring with two! And not on Terra either, where at least there's space to disappear into, but up in the Sack, where I gather things are a bit cozy. Oh, well, every man to his own insanity. I suppose you'll be wanting another 'wife' ticket on the *Tsiol*. Guess I can wangle it, if you'll agree to give the Russki photographers a free hand with you the next couple days."

"Can't be 'wife,'" I told him. "*Tsiol*'s crew is all Russki, and Russian Circumlunans are all most conventionally moral, at least as far as us Sackabonds are concerned. A bigamous actor is just what they're waiting for. Had better be 'sister,' I guess. At least our heights agree."

"'Sister' it'll be. But how you going to justify that to Rachel. Or Kookie either?"

"My problem. And one more favor, *amigo*. On takeoff day, please see to it that each of them is privately summoned to *Tsiol* at different times, and that they're at least strapped down — and preferably given spacesickness, et cetera, injections — before they know the other's aboard."

"Do my best, old hoss. Though it'd be a mercy to you if I botched it. But it's your funeral."

Soon as he was gone, I flopped and stayed horizontal twelve hours. The session with Rachel had really finished me. And tomorrow, photographers! I wondered if Russki ones are such wearisome clots as Sack "artists of the camera." What artistry is there in pushing the button of a machine that sausage-slices visual reality?

Also, of course, guilts, fears and apprehensions tore me. Even in the Sack, bigamy must be by freest consent of all parties concerned.

Oh well, man is by nature polygamous, or at least aspires to be so, and women must make the best of it. For they *are* the best. Or else I, to name one, wouldn't want them.

The Russki photographers finished with me on the last of Spindletop — and they came closer to finishing me, too, than even my marathon-wooing of Rachel. They also proved much worse than Sack-snapshooters, throwing me around and posing me as if I were a sack of flour, demanding the impossible of me physically, especially in motion shots, grudging me occasional minutes in which to eat, eliminate and pass out, just as if there were no labor laws whatsoever in the Homeland of Socialism. (Guess there aren't.)

They wore out all my bat-

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teries, so I would have had to be carried aboard the *Tsiolkosky,* except that General Kan made a surly quartermaster hunt me up replacements from those used in C.C.C.P. power weapons. He also restored me my telescopic swords, because cameramen wanted process shots of me pinking Austin, Lamar, Hunt, Chase, Burleson and a whole detachment of fake Rangers. From now on I am a gone goose in the Lone Star Republic. No one there will believe I was anything but a knowing Russian agent from the moment I landed in Dallas.

The photogs also made use of me to the very end, for the last shots had to be of me boarding *Tsiolkovsky* amidst crowds of cheering Mexes and Cree Indians, who had gotten themselves a commissar now and were finding life a little more strenuous, what with the rigors of Russian overlordship being added to the rigors of nature in this new slice of Hither Siberia.

But somehow I managed to endure the worst the photogs could dish out and still stay erect on my exolegs. If all those pix don't sell me — and indirectly Circumluna — to the Russki rank-and-file, I don't know what can.

During those last shots I managed to say my warm good-bys to Guchu, El Tacito, Carlos Mendoza and Father Francisco, who blessed me surreptitiously and told me he has discovered he has a mission to convert the Crees, but not to mention it.

Guchu said, "Back to the Acificpay Chosen for me. Every time I consort with you ofays, I find you're crazier squares than before. Drop out, man, and turn off. You're not too bad, at that. Happen you stuck around, might be I could get you status as an honorary black."

Old Tas grunted a sardonic "*Vaya con Muerta, El Esqueleto.*" I countered, "Before I 'go with Death,' he'll have to fight me to the finish." He shrugged. "What other way?"

Mendoza shook my hand. "For El Toro too," he said. We squeezed hard.

Elmo contacted me at the end too, though he was careful to keep out of the pictures and our conversation out of earshot. He explained, "A fixer's got to keep out of humanity's eye and forego the plaudits of the public, no matter how much his ego'd be soothed by a little notoriety. Yeah, the gals are both aboard, God help you, just as you asked for them to be. Here's a pack of reefers and a jug of tequila to sooth your nerves. They're gonna need it. Now you screw the most you can, you hear me, out of those Longhairs for your 'gift.' Nobody looks after a man but a man. Remem-

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ber you got no head for money, but lucky impulses. You'll never go far wrong. Incidentally — but keep this under your headbasket — don't expect Texas to take her defeat lying down. Russia's got one mohole mine, but Lone Star's got two hundred."

"Which side are you really on, Elmo?" I asked him impulsively.

"Mine," he grinned at me.

Going aboard *Tsiolkovsky* was like returning to Circumluna, except for the continuing curse of gravity. Everything was clean, except me. All the people were calm and intelligent, even if slightly condescending. I saw the "gift" carefully stowed, then followed my learned doctor-stewardess to my water-mattress in a small alcove curtained to either side. I flopped gratefully.

"You will remove your prosthetic," she informed me in purest classic Russian.

"Nyet," I informed her.

She shrugged. "I shall strap you down."

Another "Nyet" from me. "There are hand-holds," I added.

Another shrug from her. "Injections?"

"Da," I agreed. She made them, sniffing at me a little.

When she was gone, I opened the curtains on either side. To my left and right, on similar mattresses, but strapped down, were Rachel Vachel and La Cucaracha. Each smiled at me dreamily. Then they saw each other.

"Why, you dirty, double-crossin', bigamy-bent Bluebeard!" Rachel gasped.

"Beard black," I informed her coolly. "Bigamy mildest of marital variations in Sack."

"Liar! Blasphemer! Betrayer of virgins!" Kookie spat at me from the other side. "I warn you, you black worm, never trust me with a sharp knife. I shall employ it to separate you from your organs of generation!"

"I'll hold him down," Rachel told her.

"Beloveds," I said serenely, "in Cincinnati one of you said, 'It may be different in the sky.' Believe me, it will be. Meanwhile, let us look on this simply as another theatrical tour."

"My anger is destroying my mind!" Rosa wailed.

"Scully, ah'm fit to be tied," Rachel said.

"You are tied," I reminded her.

The stewardess returned. "Raise ship in one minute. Now minus 58 seconds. A disturbance here?"

"Indeed yes!" Rosa cried. "I am this villain's wife and I wish to get off this filthy ship at once!"

"Ah'm his wife," Rachel contradicted her. "And ah'm the one wants to debark."

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I moved my forefingers in little circles at my temples.

The stewardess looked at a card in her hand. "It says 'sister' here." Unsmiling, she waved a finger at me once. "You folk of the Sack give Circumluna a most unfortunate reputation. You are not *kulturny*. But what is one to expect of actors? Minus 43." She departed.

At that moment the p.a. system most opportunely struck up with *The Saber Dance* from Khachaturian's *Gayne,* almost drowning out the girls' outraged babblings. I lightly touched a finger to either ear. I could feel the drugs taking hold. But I resisted them through the shock of blast-off and the dreadful minutes of 18 lunagravs until brennschluss.

Then, even as I was passing out, I felt the delicious release from bondage. My ghost muscles stirred. My exoskeleton became an encumbrance. I was back in my only proper environment.

100 Years Later

My great-great grandson has just returned from a trip downstairs. For sentimental reasons I wished him to wear my exoskeleton, but the Longhairs have invented an anti-grav suit that is little more than silvery overalls. So Good Old Titanium remained in his transparent museum ovoid.

Times change. But only a little. The La Cruz Theater of the Sphere goes on from hit to hit and flop to flop. Longhair synthograv (inevitable mate to anti-grav) makes entrances and exits easier. Thought-projectors give new dramas enriched subjective content.

Father and mother retired. Are thinking of spending last years in new transparent-translucent all-plastic satellite, the Ship, building 180 degrees away in same orbit as Circumluna. Quarter of Ship's population will be Circumlunan colonists, rest Terran refugees.

My wives still bicker with me and each other, but mostly we get on famously. It is years since they confessed to me that way back in Dallas they had decided to come with me to the Sack as bigamous wives. They had just wanted to get out of me the best deal they could.

Long ago we produced *Houston's Afire.* It has become a stock item in our repertoire. Next week we premier *Storm Over El Paso.*

Rachel Vachel quite rapidly transformed into an exquisite Thin and, besides her tragic acting, poetry and playwriting, be-

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gan to alternate strip routines with Idris McIllwraith. With such activities and the passing years, President Lamar's daughter has developed a more relaxed morality, which is natural in a Texan, come to think of it. But I do not know about her affairs, if any. I never spy on my wives and expect, though I do not always get, the same courtesy from them.

La Cucaracha remains completely unchanged, a natural Athletic, a demanding wife and a shrew-cat for jealousy. She is the Sack's unequalled aerobatrix and, now that we have syntho-grav, entertains with classic Flamenco dances.

Fifty years ago, partly to assert my independence, I had a mad love affair with Idris McIllwraith, which for two weeks was the talk of the Sack and Circumluna's shame. It ended when Rosa sliced me twice, fortunately only across the chest. She was fined — for nicking the bubble with a wild slash and almost depressurizing the Sack compartment.

Poor Idris. Twenty years ago Rachel developed a serious heart degeneration — it is not safe to go Thin after childhood. But then Idris was explosively brained by a tiny meteorite — first time such a thing happened — and Rachel received her aged but hale heart as transplant. She sometimes asks, "How's it make you feel, Scully, to have your old girlfriend's heart beating inside of me?"

How to answer that one?

Aside from Idris we are all going strong. Circumlunan biologists have developed the Texo-Russian directional hormone and are applying it neither vertically nor horizontally, but temporarily, so that a man is taller in time. In any case, who ever dies in free fall? At first and even second appearance, it is a most harsh environment, yet I believe life and man were meant for it. Life itself appeared and had its first great flowering in a kind of free fall, the sea. As life shifted some of its companies to land, the battle against gravity continued — the insects by their lightness and wings, the bird also. Even our immediate and happy-go-lucky tree-dwelling forebearers had their own small idea about the achievement of free fall. Now with our nulgrav existence and technological anti-grav, we are perhaps really going somewhere. At any rate, it can be a good life.

For almost a century Russian "gifts" squared Sack's account with Circumluna. But then, due in part to great military reverses, a new spasm of Marxist fundamentalism and of hate for Sky-Russians developed in C.C.C.P. "Gifts" cut off quick. Circumlunans, used to them, blamed us

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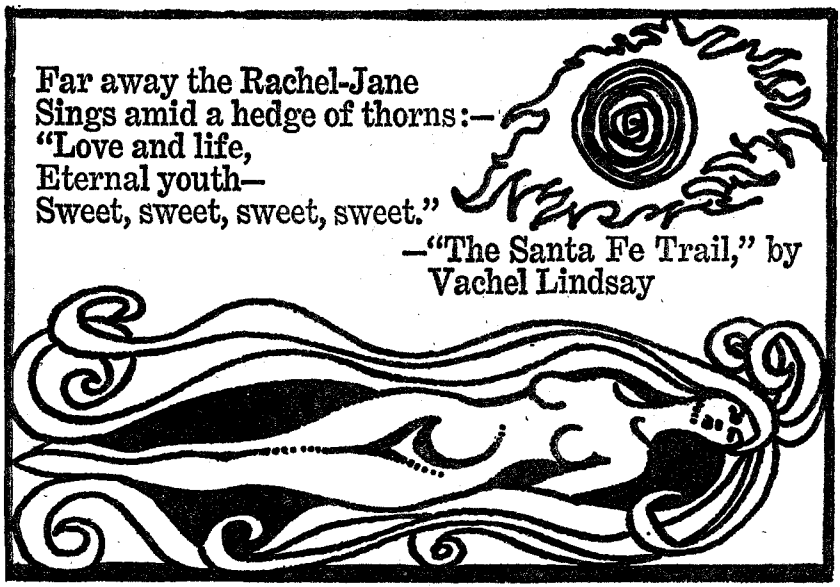
Sackabonds. It was chiefly to find a new source of Terran funds that Christopher Crockett La Cruz V went downstairs.

He tells a strange story. Greatly aided by mohole radioactives, Texas mounted war after war against Russia and China. At the same time, unbridled and par-



anoically grandiose use of hormone was creating generations of Texans ten and twelve feet high. These sometimes had brilliant minds, but were tragically short-lived — height's and mass's strain on heart and whole system, plus effects of mounting radioactivity of air, ground, sea, all else.

Texas had an army deep in Mongolia, when its general, a 19-year-old, 13-foot military genius of the Alexander breed, succumbed to early heart disease. At the same time, the Seventh Bent-Back Revolution was successful. Within a year all tall Texans were dead, unless there is truth in report of small Texan colonies in Australia and Antartica. They had gone the way of the dinosaurs and Peking Man. Their size was developed at the expense of more important survival traits — too big for their ego and their dreams.

What was left of Texas became the curious nation of Anarquia Mehico — if a self-styled "anarchy" may be called a nation.

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Its boundary with Russia is approximately the ancient one between the old United States and Canada. The furry ones have become more and more arctic, uninterested in temperate-zone conquests. Besides, all the land to the south is badly contaminated by radioactivity from the moholes.

Anarquia is a curious and fairly promising nation, I gather, though it must devote much of its thought and energy to purifying its poisoned air, soil, water, people and germ plasm. The combination of Latin, Indian and short Texan (honorary Mex) seems not a bad one. Tall Texas left much salvageable industry, while the Mexes, gaining ground with each revolution, became a more prudent and industrious race.

At any rate, the La Cruz Theater and the Sack have found new funds there to help to pay their rent to Circumluna. The donor was the Mendoza-Earp Foundation for Serendipitous Studies, founded by the Carlos and the Elmo Oilfield, whom I once knew.

Carlos lived to a great age for a Terran, dying only a quarter century ago, while Elmo disappeared in Africa some fifty years before that, during a mysterious "fixing" mission for the Pacific Black Republic. He left Mendoza, by illegal channels of course, a considerable fortune.

Recalling how he both sucked me in and took care of me, remembering his tall tales and belly realism, but above all else his irreverant good humor, I like to think of him still going on with his "fixing," somewhere.

— FRITZ LEIBER

Announcing —

THE GALAXY AWARDS

Galaxy Publishing Corporation announces the establishment of annual awards for excellence in science-fiction writing. Every story appearing in the magazines *Galaxy* and *If* in issues dated 1968 will be eligible for the first series of awards, which will consist of:

1968 Galaxy Award
$1,000.00

for the best story of the year. Honorable Mention will receive $250; the next runner-up will receive $100.

The procedure by which the winning stories will be selected is intended to reflect the judgment of the readers of *Galaxy* and *If*. Principal reliance will be placed on a mail survey of a randomly selected group of subscribers to the magazines in making the awards. Questionnaires asking for preferences will be circulated to these subscribers approximately one month after the December issues appear.

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Galaxy Bookshelf

by ALGIS BUDRYS

The Russians, may the snow fall lightly, have always loved large, noisy things. They are the people of the biggest cannon, the biggest concentrations of cannon, the biggest orchestras, the biggest bells, the biggest rockets and clusters of rockets . . . If it functions, good. If it advertises that it functions, ever so much

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the better. A Russian — a real, honest-to-Muscovy Russian — is the closest Europe has yet come to producing a Texan.

The Russians, may the river not flood, have their reasons for being among the few people on Earth to determine attitude on the basis of physical evidence. What concerns us is that the peoples who equate progress with physical exertion, and who evaluate the worth of progress by ascertaining the efficiency of the attendant physical effort, are also classically the science-fiction peoples. And the Russians have a penchant for sf that goes back to the day of Mary Shelley at least. There is a rich tradition of imitation-*Frankenstein* fiction in Russian, probably reaching down to the pulpiest possible levels, for the old *emigres* who used to reminisce about them so fondly were also avid Nick Carter fans in their boyhoods. (To this day, I believe, the *Novoye Russkoye Slovo* continues the practice of decades in running one comic strip for its audience of U.S.-resident newspaper readers. "Tarzan" with Cyrillic captions is, believe me, a visual experience).

What is also interesting is that while Russian sf writers are out-of-phase with us, they nevertheless find and exploit the same possibilities we do, although apparently some years behind us. Postwar Soviet sf, for example, was Gernsbackian, with the same sesquipedalian enthusiasm for technology the liberator: "Ah, Comrade, here among the marvels of the year 2000, while we traverse the pneumatic tubeway between your apartment and your office, we are free to discuss dialectical materialism in total tranquility, as contrasted to the old days when one had to shout in the street. One almost regrets the interval is so short, but if we leave any points uncovered, I shall dictate a hypnagogic electromagnetic recording of my remarks, and you shall play it in your sleep tonight on your somniac encephalon, da?"

The Russians now, may the tundra bloom, give every evidence of having discovered John Campbell. ("But why was the whole thing started in the first place? What for?" "Well, just how should I explain it . . .?" Betly thought a moment. "You see, it's this way in science: 'What if?' A lot of discoveries have come from this." "What do you mean by 'What if?'" "Well, take for instance: 'What if we place a live wire in a magnetic field?' This 'What if' gave us the electric motor . . . in short, it just means experimenting.")

Out of context, this may sound like simply a more sophisticated expression of enthusiasm for tech-

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nology. To some extent it is, but it is even more an enthusiasm for the reflective, speculative mind of the philosopher of engineering. It is a shift toward humanism, although, as in the original, always with the highest premium being placed on competence. *First* you qualify; *then* you may speak.

Many of the stories in *Path Into the Unknown,* subtitled "The Best of Soviet Science Fiction," (Delacorte Press, $4.95, with an introduction by Judith Merril), read as if they were from the back pages of circa 1950 *Astoundings.* One or two, "An Emergency Case" by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, and "The Purple Mummy," by Anatoly Dneprov, remind one powerfully of Eando Binder; the parallel is uncanny in the case of the Strugatskys, for "Wanderers and Travellers" by Arkady Strugatsky working alone is an apparently poetic and humanistic story built around an obvious gimmick employed to give the reader a momentary cheap thrill without putting him — or the author — to the work of going through the story which should begin where Strugatsky leaves it. On this and other evidence, I would say that whoever compiled this anthology of the "best," (which carries an original English copyright date of 1966), had the same delicate problem Miss Merril has every year in this country — how to bring out a book you can call the "best" while still including some bylines the public will recognize as top-drawer even though they're getting a little musty. The Russians, on the basis of this example, don't have any better an answer here than we do.

The tone of general dull competence and overfamiliarity in this book is happily interrupted by Sever Gansovsky's "A Day of Wrath." G. Gor's "The Boy" has its moments. Both are novelettes; the two short stories in this book, "The Conflict" and "Robby," both by Ilya Varshavsky, prefigure what must by now be a booming, general enthusiasm for F & SF-style writing . . . they're about due for it, may the potato blossom.

"A Day of Wrath" (from which the 'What if' passage was quoted — I made up the hypnagogic pneumatic one, from a memory of Yefremov), is about an experiment gone wrong — the creation, and then the abandonment, of a bearlike, android race, who begin to terrorize a rural province after being left to their own devices. The characters in the story have pseudo-Anglic names: Betly, Fidler, Mellor, Richard and Klein. It is a little like *The Island of Dr. Moreau,* and a little bit like Walter M. Miller's "Conditionally Human," but it is set in the

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Soviet Union although Gansovsky may not realize that; nowhere else on Earth, any more, are you going to find the combination of technological urban centers, horseback transportation and brooding extreme rural isolation that makes this story so effective.

This capability of presenting immediate contrasts between technology's attitude and the old soil-bound ways (and arousing the old peasant fear of beckoning, imperious voices outside the cabin at night) is apparently the major unique contribution the Russians are making to the body of science fiction. It's also interesting that Gansovsky ends his story with a peasant uprising against the androids, after the metropolitan establishment fails to protect them from its own creations, but if this really signifies anything political, I doubt if even Gansovsky realizes it out loud.

There are translation problems, by the way. "The Boy" dissolves into incomprehensibility just as we are about to learn how a contemporary young genius could be the medium of communication with a similar boy from a prehistoric terrestrial civilization. Judy feels the translator was trying to say "ESP." I feel he was trying to say "doppelganger" in a Gilbert Gosseynish sense, but who can be sure? And "The Purple Mummy" has to be "The Purple Mannequin," or "The Purple Simulacrum."

Either way, it's purple. But Vladislav Krapivin's "Meeting my Brother" is ultraviolet, or perhaps supersonic, in exactly the same way Don A. Stuart wrote in a high whine whose upper registers plucked directly at the tough sentimentalist in all of us. It's about a lonely boy who waits for a cosmonaut ancestor to come back from a time-dilation flight and be his older brother. It's not a very good story. In U. S. terms, there are 1936 plot devices all through it, and lots of symbols straight out of the self-conscious literary days of the 1950's. But it's a lovely human idea, and that's what the story's about. The science in it is used solely for the purpose of offering an otherwise impossible solution to a common human problem; this is the latest definition of science fiction, on either side of the Iron Curtain/time-shift.

The Russians, may the spoon not break the glass, are a people just like us — contradictory, a little more rural, a little more academic, just as overwhelming and convinced they're right, louder than most of us in assuming their rightness and equally speculative in evolving fresh views of themselves. This is a good book. It won't tell you whether the Russians are bad or good — I per-

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sonally find the U.S.A. preferable — but particularly if you are interested in it as an indicator of how people are getting along with their physical capabilities . . . here is a most valuable opportunity to take a fresh perspective.

Another book for you is Mark R. Hillegas's *The Future as Nightmare: H. G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1967. $5.75). This has been out for some time, but no one has paid enough attention to it, so I'm doubling back to it now.

Hillegas teaches English and conducts a course in science fiction and utopian fantasy at Southern Illinois University; this book appears to be a thesis. Sidney Coleman and Harlan Ellison both tell me there is nothing new in it. And I expect this is true. But there was lots new in it to me.

Not so much because it revolutionized any profound views on my part. But because it does the job it offers to do. It surveys and comments on the course of Wellsian science fiction, from its development by H. G. Wells on through its subsequent modifications, its effect on such Russian writers as Evgenyi Zamyatin and its response in such reactionaries as Aldous Huxley. It quotes and summarizes from Wells, from *We* and from an appreciation of Wells by Zamyatin, from Orwell, from Huxley, and among others from Ayn Rand, who is pretty conclusively shown to have imported quite a bit of Zamyatin/Wells back into the Anglic side of the time-shift. In other words, it's a handy compendium of milestones, together with a covering explanation for where we were and where we're going, and why.

For combined readability, portability and digestibility, there is nothing like it in the field. I have grave reservations about some of its conclusions on Wells's evolution as a writer, because I differ 180 degrees . . . well, 178 . . . with Hillegas's preconceptions on the subject. And Wells is the key to the whole business, for us as well as the Russians, because he remain the outstanding expositor of both the hope, and the despair, which are embodied in technology and which are the major facts of life in our world. So how you regard Wells, and what you think about Huxley, Orwell, Rand and other popular philosophers who reacted to him and to what he felt at various times in his career, is crucial to what you will think of Hillegas's reasoning. But this is not crucial to whether the book is valuable, and you should have it. Because if you are past the stage where anything labeled "sf" is just ducky wonderful, and you are beginning to find that some

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writers sing to you while others turn you OFF, without much reference to measurable factors like literary ability, then there may not be anything new for you in this book, but where else is it all in one place?

We are becoming educated. The cuteness of the early F&SF school of editing — and its open contempt for the accomplishments of the Campbellian school — has paid off not only in buckets and buckets of froth but in a positive move toward incorporating Liberal Arts concepts into what had been almost exclusively a B. S. field.

We have paid for this, through the nose, and we are still paying for it; the field is choked with poseurs. But we are beginning to get positive value for it, as well.

It's in the nature of things that what we get is rarely either pure horse or pure unicorn. Take a book like R. A. Lafferty's *Past Master* (Ace).

The setting is Astrobe, a human world of the future; to all appearances, the only human world that counts. Astrobe was planned as a utopia, a golden place where the human dream will reach full fruition. But things are in trouble. It's now the "Astrobe dream," for, as in Cordwainer Smith's world, the distinction between human and mechanical is fast rubbing out. Programmed persons, and mechanical assassins, destroy anyone whose emotions are not in accord with the dream. And despite the golden cities, there are "feral strips," where dwell people and beasts out of nightmare, and there is Cathead which, with The Barrio, is a devouring, rapidly expanding slum where millions dwell in ghastly, short-lived squalor despite the fact that luxury and long life are freely available to all who return to society.

The world, the dream and Man all are tottering. The triumvirate which rules the world meets in a guarded room to nominate the next World President at this crucial time. The mechanical killers meanwhile wreak slaughter with the guards in the corridors, for they must be kept away from the triumvirs, one of whom is their target because they can sense his lack of accord with the Astrobe dream.

Whom do they select? Who else but the author of *Utopia?* Given a time-travelling capability, what more logical thing to do than to send back to old Earth for Sir Thomas More, who is also not only a certified, beatified Catholic saint but also A Man for All Seasons, and about to get his head cut off anyway?

You see what I mean about education. If anyone had tried

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this even a few years ago, the writer would have had to spend so much time building up More's credentials that there wouldn't have been room for any story. But things have changed, and Lafferty's "What if?" is not "What if you wanted to travel in time?" but "What if you had trouble in Utopia?"

You also see what I mean about part horse, part unicorn. Because the *ostensible* "What if?" is "What if Thomas More had trouble in Utopia?" and to that "What if?" we get no believable answer.

More has a great many adventures, meets many picturesque people, says some engaging things and does not much resemble either the hero of the play or the figure in the encyclopedia articles. His solution to the problem turns out to be to die in exactly the way he died in renaissance England, to great and implausible popular effect, except that again he departs into the future just before the blade falls.

The temptations he meets are illusory; Lafferty is so busy creating incidents that he fails to sustain Thomas's character. It doesn't often happen, but here's a book that should have been 50% longer. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with what's in it, but it's a collection of good scenes at which Thomas arrives and departs; what is happening to him inside is happening in the waits offstage. His ultimate escape is worth a momentary smile, but it leaves a lasting sense of vitiation. It's the polar apposite of the empty feeling you get from stories in which it turns out Homer, Leonardo, Christ and Thomas Edison were all travelers from the future.

It is good to see this kind of thing being written. It fills in the structure that Delany, Zelazny and some of those other people haven't paused to do more than indicate. It provides a place for skilled work to be done, and for future generations to evolve from. Lafferty is a good man, even if he does talk incessantly about his drinking problem.

Well, anyway. This would have been a beautifully rounded column if Lafferty had only introduced Wells instead of More into the utopian problem. But Wells *was* so damned shabby-genteel.

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GALAXY'S STARS

Robert Silverberg, who has written more books than most people have letters, is a dapper young man with a neat, scholarly beard, married to a pretty physicist named Barbara, possessor of roughly a dozen Siamese cats and a huge house formerly occupied by New York's famous "Little Flower," Fiorello H. LaGuardia. Among his accomplishments is a successful term, just now ending, as president of the Science Fiction Writers of America. In last year's balloting for the SFWA's annual "Nebula" awards for excellence, Silverberg was in the running in two of the four competitions—coming in second and third respectively with his Ballantine novel, *Thorns,* and his memorable short novel, *Hawksbill Station,* originally published in these pages a year or so ago.

But nobody has all the luck in the world, and Silverberg has had to take a few jolts from fortune—most recently a large-scale fire which wrecked his home, interrupted completion of a number of books because the notes for them were unavailable during repairs and generally complicated his life. It's an ill wind, though; the fire that postponed his books made it possible for Silverberg to put in a little more time on science-fiction stories. *Nightwings* is the first fruit. Our opinion of it is fairly simply expressed: We just think it's the best story he ever wrote.

* * *

Fritz Leiber, whose *A Specter Is Haunting Texas* winds up in this issue, is at the moment en route to Clarion College, Pennsylvania, where he and half a dozen other science-fiction notables will be teaching a summer course in science-fiction writing. In the process of getting there Leiber is driving cross-country from California, his car decorated with notable lines from the novel . . . watch for it! Brian W. Aldiss is Literary Editor of the Oxford *Daily Mail* in England, winner of the 1966 Nebula award and Guest of Honor at the 1965 World Science Fiction Convention in London. Lise Braun, a New York housewife, appears here for the first time anywhere. We predict you'll see her again—an easy prediction, as it happens, because her second short story, *Leviathan,* is scheduled for an early issue of *Galaxy.*

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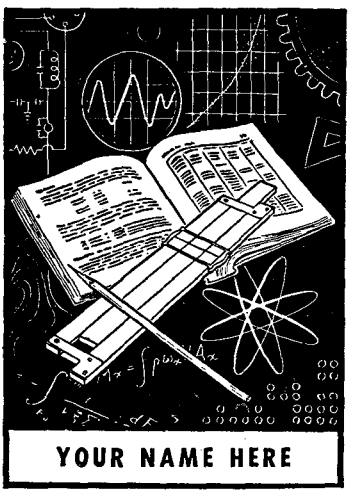

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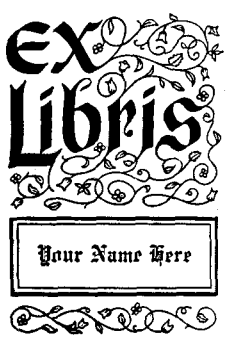

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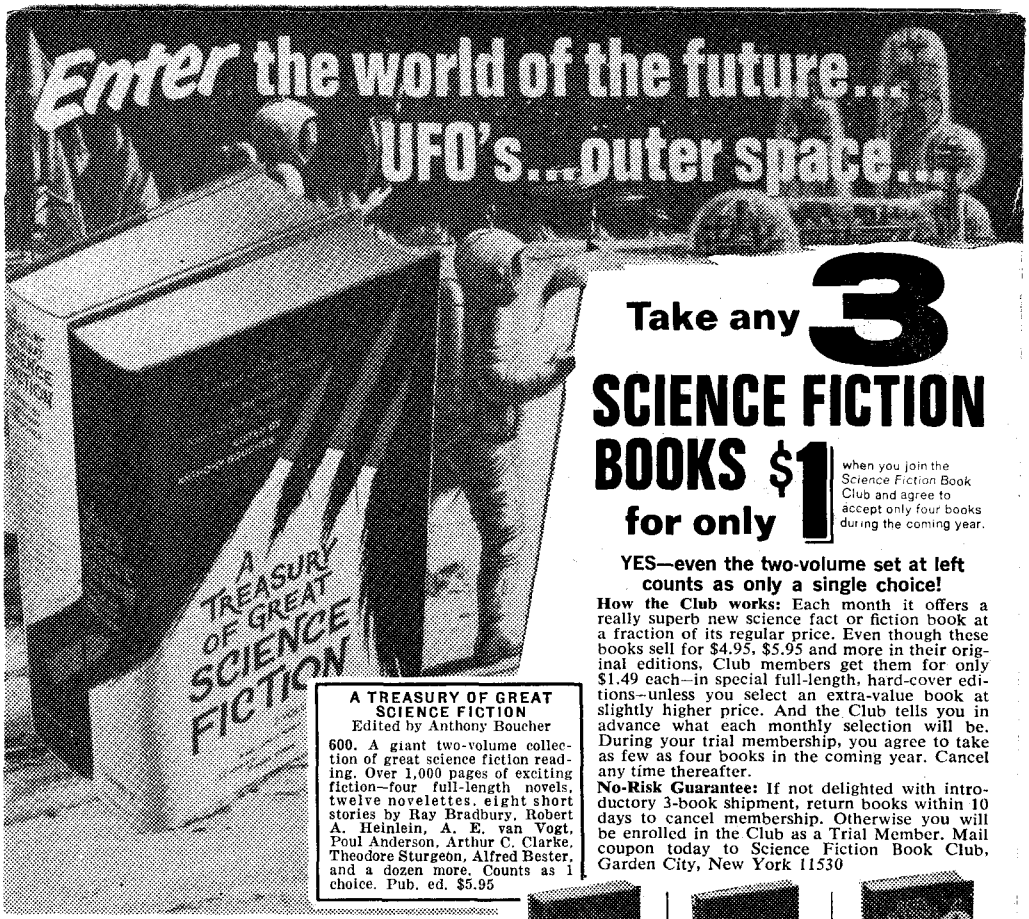

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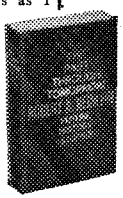

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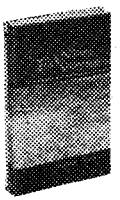

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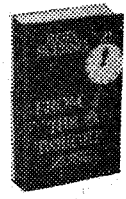

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